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Globalisation, Societies and Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cgse20

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To cite this article: Anna Traianou (26 Dec 2023): After the last good year: trade unions and educational reform in Greece, Globalisation, Societies and Education, DOI: 10.1080/14767724.2023.2294139

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2023.2294139

Published online: 26 Dec 2023.

GLOBALISATION, SOCIETIES AND EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2023.2294139

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After the last good year: trade unions and educational reform in Greece

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ABSTRACT

Education policy research has seen a growing interest in the consequences of teacher trade unionism of global education reform. Less attention has been paid to teacher unions as strategic social actors attempting to influence both national education policy and employment relations at the school level. Addressing this topic, the article examines the challenges and dilemmas of teacher trade unions as they negotiate education policies in crisis contexts. With a particular concern for school and teacher evaluation, it focuses on reforms in Greek education, as these have played out in a period of structural adjustment and prolonged austerity (2010–2023). Drawing on interview data with leading members of the primary and secondary teacher unions, the article discusses the conditions in which reforms have emerged and the responses they have evoked from teacher unions in an education state undergoing historically significant change. It argues that the crisis provoked uncertainties of strategy in Greek teacher unionism. Nevertheless, unions maintain their identity as active components of movements for educational change and as organisations that aim to defend the status and working conditions of their members. Debates in Greece highlight a combination of economic and political aspirations, characteristic of teacher unions across Southern Europe.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 15 July 2023
Accepted 7 December 2023

KEYWORDS
Strategic social actors; austerity; teacher evaluation reform; Greek teacher trade unions; Poulantzas; executive state

Introduction

After a period of some neglect (Jones 2005), the changing terms of teacher unions' participation in policy processes are now more frequently an object of research (Verger, Fontdevila, and Zancajo 2016). The impact of new public management on their bargaining influence has been extensively surveyed (Müller, Kurt Vandaele, and Waddington 2019) and, in some national cases, has now been given detailed attention (Peruzzo, Ball, and Grimaldi 2022). In other ways, however, teacher unions remain under-researched. There have been only limited efforts (Weinstein and Zettelmeier 2022) to appreciate them as strategic and collective actors who attempt to shape both national policy directions and industrial relations at the level of the school. The article aims to build on this limited literature by examining the challenges and dilemmas of teacher trade unions as they attempt to negotiate education policies in crisis contexts. Its starting point is the reforms in Greek education, as these have been enacted in a period of structural adjustment and prolonged austerity (2010–2023); its particular concern is with the implementation of school and teacher evaluation policies. The article seeks to

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establish the conditions in which reforms have emerged, to explain their historical significance and to identify features of the new kind of education state which they help to constitute. It discusses the challenges they pose to the historic status and current position of teacher trade unionism in Greece, the ways in which these challenges are interpreted by union cadres and the strategic rethinking towards which they are led. Understanding teacher unions as politically diverse entities, the article explores the motivations for the contestation of policies of evaluation as variously expressed by union leaderships and by oppositional tendencies on their executive bodies.

The article draws from a larger project funded by the British Academy that employed a historical case study methodology to understand the making of national education policy in conditions of structural adjustment and state reformation (Traianou 2023a). Here, I make use primarily of interview data with leading members of the Greek Primary [state] Teachers Federation (DOE) and the Federation of Secondary State School Teachers (OLME) to ask:

> What are the perspectives of trade union cadres on their strategic options during the period of austerity, structural adjustment and state reformation? What major differences in perspective are there between tendencies within the unions?
>
> How do they assess and relate to the evaluation reforms of the post-2019 governments?
>
> How does analysis of Greek union perspectives contribute to the understanding of teacher trade unions as social and political actors in the period of continuing neoliberal reform?

The article is organised into six sections. The first two deal with the theoretical background. The third presents the context of Greek teacher unionism and its relationship to the broader literature on teacher unions. The article moves on to discuss the methodology of the research (Section 4) and the analysis of the data collected (Sections 5–7). The final section discusses my findings and concludes with the contribution of the research to the broader literature on teacher unions.

Austerity, crisis and state reformation

I have elsewhere discussed the educational dimensions of policies of austerity and structural reform (Traianou 2023a; 2019). In this article, drawing on Poulantzas (1969; 1975 and 1978), I focus on the strategic aspect of policy and thus draw attention to its conflictual elements. For Poulantzas (1969, 77), the state is an 'instance' that 'maintains the cohesion of a social formation and … reproduces the conditions of production of a social system by maintaining class domination'. In Jessop's elaboration, it is a 'distinct ensemble of institutions and organisations whose socially accepted function is to define and enforce collectively binding decisions on the members of a society in the name of their common interest or general will' (Jessop 1990, 341). This is not a monolithic understanding. As Poulantzas (1975 and 1978) has pointed out, the state is a domain in which competing strategies for hegemony encounter each other (Jessop 1985). The institutions of the state (~~e.g.~~e.g. the school, the church, etc.), its relation to social actors, and its capacity to bring about or resist change are all influenced by social conflict. A state's historical and formal constitution is the result of such interplay – a 'material condensation' of conflicts (Jessop 2011, 43), reflecting an 'unstable equilibrium of compromises' (Poulantzas 1975, 192). Institutions and policies evolve through the 'push and pull and policy debate and class struggle' (Jessop 1990, 341).

Poulantzas developed this theoretical perspective in the context of the political crisis of the 1970s in Southern Europe. State forms, especially in a crisis period, were often destabilised by the political struggles that occurred within them and around them, so that the state might have a 'fractured, disunified' character (Poulantzas 1978, 206). In attempts to resolve the crisis, dominant parties and interests might strive to make the state more coherent; in doing so they might take decisive measures to change the state forms of an earlier period. Following the post-2008 crisis, Jessop (2011; 2019) developed this understanding further. He noted that 'the intensification and interaction of crisis-tendencies of different kinds [political, economic, social] … have led to an

increasingly authoritarian statist form of neoliberal regime'. There had been a radical change in political institutions, lessening whatever influence that subordinate groups might possess. (Jessop 2019, 356). Bruff and Tansel (2020, 233–234) complementing this analysis, write of new governing practices that 'seek to marginalise, discipline and control dissenting social groups and oppositional politics rather than strive for their explicit consent or co-optation'. Such practices include 'the repeated invocations of "the market" or "economic necessity" to justify a wide range of restructurings across various societal sites'; the 'growing tendency to prioritise constitutional and legal mechanisms rather than democratic debate and participation and the centralisation of state powers by the executive branch' (ibid.).

In the case of Greece, the economic crisis of 2008 which led to three programmes of structural adjustment (2010, 2012 and 2015), the collapse of the main political parties, and the rise and subsequent defeat of the radical left have led to an authoritarian refashioning of the state intended to reset the relationship between social classes. As I will argue, it is this new state with which the teacher unions are having to come to terms, with significant implications for their role as social and political actors.

Teacher unions as strategic actors in the education state

In many countries, with varying tempos and to different extents, the period 1960–1990, saw the development of political regimes which were 'labour-inclusive', featuring parliamentary democracy, strong social-democratic parties, centralised trade unions and a degree of partnership in policy-making (Streeck and Hassel 2003; Streeck 2005). Organised labour was included in the political and economic governance of the modern nation-state (Goldthorpe 1984). The education sector was no exception to these developments.

For much of the twentieth century teachers and teacher unions were viewed by governments as policy partners in nation-building projects (Nordin and Wahlstrom 2019). For Weinstein and Zettelmeier (2022), union activity had several dimensions. As a primary function, unions represent the needs of their members in the workplace. They also, to varying extents, played a part in the administration of the education system. At the same time, as political actors, they presented themselves as the collective voice of teachers wishing to influence educational reforms and policy and, more ambitiously, to become a force capable of shaping the character of their societies. In many countries, unions had an important influence on the character of post-war educational expansion, based on an ideal of equal opportunities and a directive and expansionist role for the state (Derouet and Normand 2011). In countries of the European South, teachers and their unions were prominent in the resistance to dictatorships and in the post-dictatorship reconstruction of education (O'Malley and Boyd Barratt 1995; Rezola 2016; Traianou 2019). They were an active component both of movements for educational change and efforts to raise the professional level and working conditions of their members (Rezola 2016). The relationship between trade union and political action was complementary rather than divergent: in Greece for instance the post-1974 idea of the 'democratic school' combined a claim to professional autonomy with a broader vision of an education system serving popular interests (Traianou 2023b).

In the 1990s, governments departed from their 'bargain' (Streeck 2005) with organised labour, promoting a 'deep [neo]liberalisation of national economies' (ibid), whose effects were debilitating for labour, both in terms of political influence and economic security. The success of neoliberal policies and ideas is related to the decline of trade unionism around the advanced capitalist world (Kelly 2018; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013a and 2013b). The decline is understood as political as well as industrial; it is reflected not just in a loss of bargaining influence, but in a change in institutional position. The reworking of education under the influence of neoliberalism involves a reshaping of the 'education state' (Ball and Youdell 2008; Grimaldi and Serpieri 2012). Recalling Jessop, the education state can be defined as the 'ensemble of institutions and organizations', local as well as national, through which 'collectively binding decisions' are implemented in the specific field of education. Ball and Youdell (2008, 12) refer in this context to the emergence of

'an ensemble of innovations, organisational changes, new relationships and social partnerships, all of which play their part in the re-working of the state itself'.

Underpinning this change is a new perspective on the part of policy-makers. Teachers and trade unions are viewed as a policy problem, lacking the capacity to contribute to a programme of educational change whose focus is not expansion but quality (Corrales 1999). The turn to 'quality' requires a rupture with established working practices, away from a professionalism centred on expertise and discretion, and towards a conception of teachers' work based on the effective implementation of procedures determined by expert bodies and overseen by school managements (Maroy and Voisin 2017).

Teacher union opposition to this turn has evoked critical and indeed negative accounts of their role as 'veto groups' which block quality-oriented reform (Corrales 1999). For Moe (2011, 244), the 'bedrock occupational interests on which [teachers'] organizations are based – notably teachers' most primal concern for job security, wages, benefits, and rights and prerogatives in the workplace' – will always dispose unions against radical change. Putting a 'spotlight' on teacher performance and providing 'rigorous evaluations' to drive improvement, would be 'threatening' to systems 'in which performance was never seriously evaluated and all jobs were secure' (Moe 2015, 279).

These processes, already underway before the global financial crisis of 2008, were reinforced by austerity. (Seymour 2014). 'Crisis' was utilised by policy-makers to legitimate accelerated policy change (Klein 2007). Teachers came to face not only the financial pressures of austerity on pay and conditions of work, but also a set of changes to professional practices, institutions, and relationships (Seddon, Ozga, and Levin 2013). They lost much of their influence as policy actors, while their membership base was depleted and their capacity for activity constrained (Holubová et al. 2022); they were presented with new strategic challenges, with far-reaching implications for their identity and the meaning of their work. Though the literature is sparse, some recent research has begun to reflect on this problem, examining the respective strategies of the political class and to some extent of trade unions. Merle (2019) describing the implementation of the 'Blanquer' programme of educational reform in France, points to a motivated absence of consultation on the part of the Macron administration. Pfefferkorn (2019) notes the government's success in 'provoking a state of stupefaction among education staff' with the aim of 'disorientating and disorganising' them. In a detailed engagement with Italian reforms, Peruzzo, Ball, and Grimaldi (2022) discuss government's mobilisation of 'policy technologies' that include autonomy, evaluation, and management. These have had a strategic effect, underpinning 'a governmental shift which decentralised bargaining to school contexts, a reduction of the space for collective bargaining and unions' actions, as well as processes of decollectivisation/individualisation of the employee–employer relation' (ibid).

Writing in general, cross-sectoral terms of the responses of trade unions to these challenges, some researchers (e.g. Kelly 2018) have noted that unions' behaviours resemble a much greater extent than in the later twentieth-century those social movements. Deprived of institutional influence by the turn of governments away from social partnership, unions have developed a new concern with tactics and technologies of mobilisation, with discourses that frame members' experiences in counter-hegemonic ways, and with a strategic concern for alliance-building (ibid). They also note, however, that these innovations have not been able to halt the tide of neoliberal policies and that trade unions have been just as likely to adopt more conventional approaches, that aim as much as possible to hold on to institutional influence (ibid.).

Echoes of this understanding of the dilemmas and debates in the labour movement can be found in the literature on teacher trade unionism. The most extensive discussion of the strategic issues with which reform confronts teacher unions is that of Carter, Stevenson, and Passy (2010) elaborated by Little et al. (2023), who on the basis of an English experience, have constructed three ideal types of union strategy, labelled rapprochement, resistance and renewal. The terms of their analysis have also been taken up by researchers in other national settings. Following the weakening of union influence by market reform, unions in some countries opted for a new strategy of 'rapprochement', working 'with the grain of the prevailing system', in order to replace traditional forms of trade

union action with a project aimed at regaining influence with public opinion as well as achieving a foothold in government policy-making (Maharaj and Bascia 2021; Ringarp and Balzer 2022). In other countries, at a time of growing government antagonism, this did not seem to be a credible strategy.

An alternative, at least in the short-term, was 'resistance', which implied mobilising the resources that trade unions had accumulated in the period of educational expansion in action that aimed to defeat government projects. Given the difficulties of 'resistance' at a time of neoliberal ascendancy, a third strategy emerged, 'renewal', a rebuilding of union capacity from the ground up. Little et al (2023) cite the action of the National Education Union in England and Wales in defence of members' working conditions during the pandemic as a successful example of renewal, as well as the effectiveness of the Union's pay strikes in 2023. Renewal did not lead to a recapture of unions' positions within the education state but did in some circumstances limit, from the outside, the state's capacity for action.

Greek teacher unions, evaluation reform and the refashioning of the Greek state

While teacher and school evaluation became common features of the policy landscape in OECD countries after 1990, they were less prominent in Greek education, even though they were urged upon it by external organisations and accepted in principle by national governments. One explanation for this particularity lies in the special place of questions of accountability, inspection and evaluation in relations between unions and governments in the Greek education state (Stamelos and Bartzakli 2013).

Though relatively weakly resourced, with few full-time officials, both Greek unions are strongly politicised. Their constitutions recognise the right of members to form political tendencies; these are represented on the unions' executive councils. DOE, the oldest of the two unions (est. 1922), currently contains seven distinct tendencies. One of these tendencies represents the centre-right and two the left/centre-left of the political world. The other three tendencies reflect ideological positions on the radical left. OLME (est. 1924) is organised in six distinct political tendencies whose ideological positions, to a large extent, mirror those in DOE. There is one tendency with a centre-right orientation; two of the other tendencies are close to the left/centre-left whereas the other two tendencies represent the radical left. There are no formal links between union tendencies and political parties, though it is possible to speak about broad alignments between tendency and political party. Questions of strategy are thus matters of sharp debate within each union, though the two unions tend to have commonly agreed positions on major questions of policy, evaluation included. While historically DOE, as the union which organised teachers in elementary schools when these were the only form of compulsory education, was regarded as more radical than OLME, the two unions often collaborate in mobilisations and strikes. Each union has its own research centre and magazine. Several of the tendencies also publish magazines and, in this way, they engage with teachers and the public.

In the reconstruction of Greek society which followed the fall of the dictatorship (1967–1974), the PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) government, elected in 1981 on a broadly-social democratic- wing programme, took measures to democratise the education state. The school inspectorate, associated with authoritarian governance, was abolished and PASOK initially looked for support from the unions in developing an alternative to it. Representatives from a wide range of social groups participated in school administration; textbooks were replaced, teacher education reformed and elements of progressive education practice were introduced (Grollios and Kaskaris 2003).

During the first period of PASOK (1981–1985), the government and unions shared an aspiration to create the 'democratic school' (Traianou 2019; Stamelos and Bartzakli 2013). But as from the mid-1980s onwards, PASOK accommodated policies of quality assurance favoured by global policy, the relationship between government and unions became more difficult (Stamelos, Vassilopoulos,

and Bartzakli 2012). Union opposition had blocked moves towards formal evaluation (Stamelos and Bartzakli 2013), after which there followed an unstable equilibrium. Unions reluctantly became prepared to accept a model of teacher development in which evaluation would play some part, but only if evaluation was based on professional dialogue and dissociated from mechanisms for career development or salary progression (OLME 1987; DOE 1998; Stamelos, Vassilopoulos, & Bartzakli 2012). Neither PASOK governments, nor those of the right-wing New Democracy (ND), with which they alternated in the 1990s and 2000s, accepted this position as the basis for an enduring settlement. Nevertheless, despite ongoing conflicts, teacher unions continued to play a significant role in the appointment of school advisers and more generally in the administration of the Greek education system (OECD 2018). 'Co-operative engagement' (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013b) or 'rapprochement' (Carter, Stevenson, and Passy 2010) were still feasible elements of strategy.

After the financial crisis of 2008, the pressure on the post-74 settlement increased: the future of the nation was now said by political leaders to depend upon the quality of education and therefore upon stronger management of the teaching force (Diamantopoulou 2011). In 2010 a PASOK government commissioned from the OECD a policy review intended to draw a line between past and present (see Traianou 2023a for a fuller account of the role of OECD in Greek education policy-making). The review depicted a 'failing education' system with an 'unsustainable cost-structure' – 'outdated', 'centralised' and 'ineffective' (OECD 2011, 3). It recommended that Greece should take the first steps towards a new policy for its underperforming workforce by 'increasing teachers' workloads to the EU and OECD averages by 2015' (ibid: 35). It made the professional development of school leaders a 'central priority'; they would be 'empowered with the legitimacy and authority to actually lead their schools', with the capacity to hire and fire (ibid: 35). Teachers' work should be evaluated, with the outcome being linked to pay. School autonomy should be promoted within a framework of 'outcomes-based accountability and post-audit monitoring' (ibid.:60). This policy turn, also signalled an intention to 'depoliticise' education and weaken the influence of teacher trade unions outside the classroom, in the general policy arena (OECD 2011; 2018).

This programme called into question the position of unions in the education state. However, post-2010 governments were unable to translate their discursive politics into substantive policy initiatives (Jessop 2019) and thus the challenge to the strategies of Greek teacher trade unionism was postponed. Beginning in 2010, the Greek Government faced a crisis of debt and sovereignty that was unprecedented in post-war Europe. Greece was required, as a condition of the debt bailout, to be compliant with the terms of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) elaborated by the EU, the European Central Bank and the IMF (formally known as the Institutions) as external lenders. In the face of very high levels of popular opposition, successive PASOK and centre-right governments, seen as vehicles for the lenders, collapsed. PASOK, having received 44 per cent of the vote in the election of 2009, slumped in the 2012 election to little more than 13 per cent. Though it recovered to some extent in the second round of the 2012 election, New Democracy's (ND) first round share – 19 per cent – was the worst recorded by the main party of the right since 1974 (Mavris 2012). The failure of the two parties which had dominated Greek politics since the fall of the dictatorship meant that there was no political agency which could coherently and comprehensively implement the programme of structural adjustment required by the external Institutions. In education, likewise, the recommendations of the 2011 OECD report were not taken forward. Amid the collapse of the established parties, the left-wing SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) emerged as a powerful force. Founded in 2004 as a coalition of left-wing political parties rooted in Eurocommunism, SYRIZA in the 2009 election won less than 5 per cent of the vote. By 2012, in the second round of the election, its share had risen to 27 per cent. Attracting strong support from large urban centres, workers and younger age groups, SYRIZA led mass protests against the Institutions (Mavris 2012). Its 2015 electoral programme – the Thessaloniki Programme – promised to repeal the memoranda and rebuild the welfare state. With 36 per cent of the vote in the 2015 election, SYRIZA, which by then was also supported by several former PASOK members, formed a government, in coalition with ANEL (Independent Greeks), a small right-wing party opposed to structural adjustment.

In office, SYRIZA came round to accepting many aspects of the structural adjustment programmes that it had previously pledged to oppose. Many of its more radical left side quit the party or resigned from Government. While to a minor extent, SYRIZA-led governments deflected some of the demands of the Institutions, for some analysts (Kouvelakis 2016) the overall effect of its policy turn was to halt the leftward momentum of Greek politics. In education, SYRIZA-led governments having agreed to negotiate with the OECD to implement its 2011 recommendations, managed to adopt aspects of NPM policy in diluted form. Union pressure helped to set limits to this adoption (Traianou 2023a). There was no question of implementing the party's earlier promises to rebuild the welfare state.

Following the election of 2019, SYRIZA was replaced by a right-wing New Democracy government, led by Kyriakos Mitsotakis.[1] With 40 per cent of the vote, ND committed itself to tax cuts and support for private business. In education its manifesto promised to 'create a modern school of improved quality and effectiveness' (New Democracy 2019), autonomous and strongly managed, in which teacher evaluation, linked to performance-related pay, would have an important part. Test results, like the outcome of whole school evaluation, would be published. This amounted to a programme of change at several levels, from teachers' practice, to employment relations within the school, to the governance of the education system. At the same time as seeking to place teachers under stronger managerial control, the government aimed to weaken the influence of unions. Processes of consultation and negotiation were minimised; the position of the unions was contrasted with what the government presented as the people's will. '[Greek] society not only wants but it demands evaluation', said Education Minister Niki Keremeus, 'and we have made this demand a reality' (alfavita 15.11.21 2021).

The education laws were part of a broader policy agenda. In August 2019 the parliament approved the establishment of an 'executive state' intended to establish a 'strong central authority' as opposed to a 'fragmented Government which decides without acting'. (Mitsotakis 2019). This was a model of government in which ministries responded to the directions of a central executive power, equipped by digitalisation with the means to manage and steer public administration towards 'coherence and effectiveness'. These were qualities which the OECD, a strong supporter of such reform, thought were lacking in Greek government (OECD 2020: 50). Popular strata were increasingly sealed off from decision-making processes and 'the power to fix norms and enact rules was shifting towards the executive and the state administration' (Poulantzas 1978, 219). A 'weak state', incapable of withstanding the influence of 'popular strata' would be replaced by a state which placed questions of policy and public provision 'beyond politics' in a realm of management decision-making, justified in terms of a global evidence base and 'sealed off' from the political challenge (Kivotidis 2023, 14).

These significant changes in the education state were not regarded by government as negotiable, so that there were no opportunities for 'co-operative engagement'. Unions responded to the new laws with strikes and demonstrations and encouraged schools not to supply to central government with the data on which school evaluation relied. Nevertheless, 2022–2023 saw the introduction of individual teacher evaluation, accompanied by new curricula and programmes of study and a punitive approach towards trade unions. The government obtained court orders which declared any strike 'illegal' when the measure which it protested had already been approved by Parliament.

The general elections of May 2023 gave ND the mandate to continue its reform programme in an even more accelerated form. Mitsotakis, heralding future privatisation, said that 'there [would] be a reformation of the Greek Constitution in 2025' to abolish the 'inconceivable' article 16 which had made the finance of the education system the sole responsibility of the state (11.06.2023 Sky TV).

Methodology

As indicated in the introduction, the broader project included interviews with policy actors in different roles and different levels of the education system, and this material informs my

understanding of the political events of the 2010–2023 period. In this article, I use data from narrative interviews with seven trade union representatives who post-2008, through successive phases of policy, held elected posts in the two unions, OLME (public secondary schools) and DOE (public primaries). These actors reflected the main political tendencies of each union from the centre-right (two), the centre-left (three) and the left (two). They were of different generations and occupied different places in the hierarchy, from the top of the unions' hierarchies to middle-ranking positions on the national executives. Four of the interviewees were from DOE and three were from OLME.

The interviews, varying in length from 40 to 60 min, took place in 2019–2023, most of them face-to-face in Athens, with two of the others conducted online. I conducted them in Greek and translated the extracts included in this paper.

The narrative content of the interviews was affected by their timing. Most were conducted within a 12-month span before and after the 2019 general election. Two took place some three years after the election when the implementation of New Democracy's programme was well advanced. The questions I asked related to the intense post-2010 period of political conflict and change and how these experiences were reflected in unions' strategies and their relationships with the state. I took care to check the main elements of what participants said against documentary sources. I worked from what are acknowledged to be key documents in the educational policy history of the 2010–2022 period: trade union policies, Greek legislative material (e.g. the Education Acts 2010; 2018; 2020; 2021); OECD reports (2011; 2018), and the three Memoranda of Understanding (2010; 2012; 2015). I applied what has been called 'conventional qualitative content analysis' (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) in order to identify key themes. In this, I made use of concepts derived from Poulantzas (1978) concerning the relationship between state forms and social and political conflicts. I used these concepts to generate questions in the narrative interviews and to frame the data analysis; conversely, I used the data to interrogate the Poulantzian framework, posing to myself questions about its interpretive power. I was particularly interested in understanding change over time in actors' post-2010 thinking about the policy emphases and tactics of government. I wanted to understand also, the unions' own strategic thought and the shifting terms of their response to reform. The analysis is organised into four sections following a broadly chronological order.

Dealing with the crisis years 2010–2015

The pressures of structural adjustment and austerity and the open embracing by Greek policy of the themes of the global reform agenda challenged the strategy of the unions and their sense of identity as key actors in the field of education. Though the programme set out in PASOK's 2010 legislation and in the OECD's 2011 *Education Policy Advice for Greece* was not comprehensively implemented, unions experienced a sense of policy rupture. Relations between social actors changed. Policy initiatives pointed in the direction of private influence and greater managerial power. Most dramatically, pay cuts, pension reductions, reductions in job numbers and deletion of education programmes led to repeated teachers strikes, and to government use of anti-strike legislation (Education International 2013).

Teacher union leaders, especially those who were active in the pre-crisis period, contrasted the context of the pre-2010 years with those which came later. The relationships between educational actors and the role of trade unions had profoundly changed. Before 2010, 'syndicalism revolved around every day matters': the unions' role in relation to representing teachers' interests on 'bread and butter' issues of pay and conditions was not in question (Interviewee 1). Union pressure on the government for higher salaries and increased funding was strong and conflicts were regular, but they were legitimised within a state which shared, it was said, 'a common emphasis on the importance of maintaining state education provision' (Interviewee 1). In this account, unions and government were not divided on fundamental questions of policy direction:

> In my view 2009 was the last good year for education … the then government had a coherent programme which included a budget for school maintenance without outsourcing to private companies.

The following year saw significant change on all fronts, financial, legal and policy-related:

> I think that the critical moment for teachers, for the ways in which we operate as a union and our position as citizens, was Diamantopoulou's Education Act 2010/Law 3848. (Interviewee 3).[2]

Through the 2010 Act, teachers' right to tenure was called into question and school leaders acquired managerial powers. Since this moment, 'all governments, with the exception of a few individual ministers, can be described as crisis governments' (Interviewee 3). There had been a 'disastrous continuity' (Interviewee 1) of policy, in which austerity had been accompanied by challenges to tenure, 'for the first time since the dictatorship' as one interviewee stressed (Interviewee 2), with flexibilised working conditions and the managerial empowerment of school leaders. Private sponsorship of some school activities had fed a new ethos (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013b) among some teachers and school leaders; a normalising tendency towards acceptance of the model of school management favoured by government:

> Schools have become a matter of individual interest … this is ***my school*** … I care about my school and how to improve ***my school*** (Interviewee 7 emphasis by the interviewee). Teachers often think that this kind of activity is self-evident (αυτονόητο) and they do not often recognise it as a problem, as an example, of the state's withdrawal of its responsibilities to fund the system (ibid).

From the common perspective of interviewees, evaluation was part of a broad political agenda, aimed at introducing new instruments of management, reducing the number of public service employees and laying the basis for or consolidating privatisation; evaluation could not shake off this 'negative connotation' (Interviewee 3). The direction of policy since 2010 signified something new:

> evaluation would have implications for pay and promotion and would not primarily be about the improvement of teachers' pedagogical work. This was a procedural rather than educational evaluation, [made] for financial purposes which left open the possibility of redundancy if a teacher's work was deemed inadequate twice. (Interviewee 3).

Thus, looking back at the crisis period from the vantage-point of a new post-2019 period of right-wing rule, interviewees, saw it as the first stage of reform, prefiguring later policy developments.

SYRIZA 2015–2019

The formation of a SYRIZA-led government in 2015 brought no radical changes on the scale of the democratisation measures of the early 1980s and none of the interviewees saw it in such terms. However, they credited it with some achievements. Notably, the momentum of the 2011 reform was slowed down. In the words of one interviewee belonging to a centre-right tendency otherwise critical of SYRIZA, the government's cancelling of Law 152 on evaluation was the 'salvation of teachers' (Interviewee 1). Yet it was plain to interviewees, both at the time and retrospectively, that under SYRIZA the dynamic of the previous few years continued, in the form of austerity and an acceptance of policy themes characteristic of the global reform agenda. These governmental choices were not strongly challenged. An exhausted society', noted one SYRIZA MP, critical of his own party, 'could not summon the same reaction' that it did pre 2015 (Isychos 2020, 26). The unions thus faced with a government which they could neither whole-heartedly support nor work against. Pay cuts enforced by successive structural adjustment programmes were seen as *faits accomplis* which it was unproductive to fight: 'there was no point demanding a pay increase when it felt like that the whole public sector had "accepted" this change to their living standards' (Interviewee 1). Thus an important part of the rationale for teacher trade unionism – its capacity to win immediate benefits for its members (Weinstein and Zettelmeier 2022) – was, in the view of this union tendency, significantly weakened.

The SYRIZA period was brought to a definitive close by the election of New Democracy in 2019. Yet, for many interviewees, the experience of 2015–2019 remained significant. Their reflections on the decisions they took in those years contributed to their thinking about present strategies. Some interviewees identified missed opportunities. SYRIZA, in the Memorandum of Understanding of 2015, had agreed to work with the OECD on specified issues, which included evaluation (Traianou 2023a). The unions had not embraced these negotiations, fearing that they would open the door too far to negotiations around a wider programme of reform, 'while doing little to mitigate austerity' (Interviewee 6). Yet it might have been possible to endorse the reform agenda more openly, leading to school evaluation of an acceptable kind:

> maybe we should have embraced more openly SYRIZA's framework of evaluation … it was closer to our positions … If Kerameus [the ND education minister] had brought to us that framework in 2019 [the SYRIZA-led government one] we would largely have accepted it (Interviewee 2).

From this perspective, which we could see as an example of a strategy of rapprochement (Carter, Stevenson, and Passy 2010), discussion with the OECD reviewers, even though they were representatives of 'neoliberalism' (Interviewee 5) should not have been ruled out; perhaps it would have been an opportunity for rapprochement:

> We should have met with the OECD … I think we would have got something out of the meeting and we could have shown our opposition by organizing a protest outside the Union's headquarters. (Interviewee 1).

Supporters of a left tendency were more sceptical. They had been involved in the political upheavals of 2010–2015, an experience which for them had held the potential for the 'radical transformation of the education system' (Interviewee 6). This potential had been dissipated by the experience of 2015–2019: 'there was hope before 2015 … I'm not sure what there is now' (Interviewee 2). SYRIZA had 'normalised privatisation' (Interviewee 5) by defending the sponsorship of schools by private foundations, to the point where they could influence the everyday working of the state (see Kivotidis 2023, 3).

Likewise, from the perspective of the left, SYRIZA's compromised version of evaluation had paved the way for New Democracy's more severe programme by helping to create an 'induced passivity' (Interviewee 7) among teachers, that prepared them for a new system:

> Syriza produced the concept of the 'good evaluation'. Their framework includes four clear parameters which the school will have to respond to. One of them makes references to the effectiveness of the school unit, pupils results. Another one is about finding support or making links with the local community, which means look for sponsors … The report will be qualitative … there are no quantitative indicators but this does not make it distinct from previous programmes. I often ask my union colleagues. Have you realized what you have done? You left the tracks for the train to run. New Democracy will arrive and it will just press the button … . (Interviewee 6).

For the left, 'induced passivity' was a habit that had become ingrained in the core leadership of the unions. Its consequences were seen as severe and long-lasting:

> And there is nothing we can do … there is no forward thinking … At a practical level, at the level of mobilisations, the Union has got a problem … especially in the secondary schools there is a complete agreement between the two tendencies of the union affiliated to Syriza and ND … to be honest there is not much difference between their two programmes … My colleagues in the union leadership often say that teachers are tired … they cannot carry on being on permanent mobilisations and so on … '. (Interviewee 7).

The left identified here a defeatist outlook. In reality, conditions could only be defended by a strategy of resistance (Carter, Stevenson, and Passy 2010) based on intensive action and a refusal to accept any part of a 'good evaluation framework' (Interviewee 7). Interviewees belonging to the left tendency identified one strong example of resistance which in their view pointed the way towards a more successful strategy, of 'activating the rank and file structures of the unions' (Sartzekis 2020). SYRIZA had sought to introduce a qualification-based system for the appointment of the increasingly large number of adjunct teachers whom austerity measures had deprived of the

opportunity during 2010–2019 to get a permanent contract. Strikes and mobilisations by these teachers, in which the left tendency had an important organising role, secured changes in the government's position in its negotiations with the OECD and the Institutions (see Traianou 2023a) and achieved job security for thousands of teachers.

The thinking of interviewees on relations with SYRIZA-led governments was part of a much wider set of reflections on the direction of Greek education and the place of unions within it. Interviewees on the left made use of the unions' experiences under SYRIZA to highlight the necessity of a strategy of resistance. Those on the centre-left and centre-right meditated on an alternative past', one in which union engagement with government and the Institutions might have led to an agreement on new policies that would have been hard for the New Democracy government to abolish. For both the left and for other tendencies, the meaning of the SYRIZA period in government was understood from the point of view of their present, post-2019 difficulties.

'There was no time for us to breathe': dealing with post-2019 reform

In the reflections on the union tendencies during the SYRIZA period, their differences became evident. In their evaluation of the New Democracy government, however, the tendencies shared common ground. They saw it as a resumption of the policies of the crisis period and, as such, a danger to the status and conditions of teachers. They also regarded ND's return as a threat to the place that teacher unions had historically occupied in the Greek education state.

Against the ND government's position on evaluation, interviewees from the majority leadership stressed a perspective which they claimed stemmed from educational rather than managerial concerns. They were not 'against evaluation' (Interviewee 3) but insisted it should have a pedagogical purpose:

> They have tried to make the case that teachers are against evaluation. Neither trade union is negative towards evaluation … It is the specific form of evaluation of the present government to which the unions object … a bureaucratic exercise removed from pedagogy and with a punitive character (Interviewee 5).

The unions had hoped on this basis to engage with New Democracy. Instead, they faced a government which they realised was determined to the point of confrontation, the like of which 'they had never experienced before' (Interviewee 4). The newly established 'executive state' had taken decisive political action, with the Minister, 'choosing a tough strategy for the rapid implementation of a radical programme of reform (Interviewee 5).

Just as the 2010 crisis had been 'instrumentalised' by government (Interviewee 5) to accelerate education reform, so the conditions of inactivity imposed by the pandemic had been utilised to 'shut down the possibilities for mobilisation' (Interviewee 4),. In the emerging executive state, there were 'meagre levels of consultation' (Interviewee 5) not only about the impending 2020 and 2021 Education Acts but more generally, to the point where principles of democracy had been undermined. In Poulantzian terms, a buffer had been set up between 'popular strata and decision-making processes' (1978: 219).

> We invited several times the Ministry to engage in a dialogue with the Unions but … the pandemic and the lockdown were used as excuses, putting barriers on the kind of meetings and the number of representatives present at the meetings … … For us it is a matter of democracy … it is not simply a matter of lack of dialogue … Amendments to an education act would pass through parliament at 12 pm on a Friday evening … one after the other … There was no time for us to breathe … (Interviewee 4).

In this context of state refashioning, the role of teacher unions as policy actors, addressing the central questions of policy by which the everyday work of the unions was shaped, seemed more central than ever. The issues now, according to some interviewees, were 'more fundamental [than pay]: they are about 'the kind of education we want in Greece' (Interviewee 1):

> Our priority now is to maintain the public character of education … Our work has turned into a shield aimed at saving whatever it can … The Union's agenda has switched to defensive action. (Interviewee 1)

'Defensive action', for the majority tendency, was a term that embraced a range of issues:

> We focused on claiming back professional development rights … the right to research … the school structure … the hiring of teachers … other demands revolve around school building maintenance … the health and safety of teachers … there are also legislative struggles for example we managed finally to establish the two year compulsory pre-school education (Interviewee 2).

In other circumstances, this set of objectives might have provided the basis for a strategy of rapprochement, but in the political conditions established by the New Democracy government, the space for union-government dialogue was highly constrained. Interviewees interpreted New Democracy's programme as a more forceful resumption of earlier policy themes, implemented by advisers 'who worked alongside ministers in 2010–2014' (Interviewee 5) so that the policy of the earlier period was returning 'as our worst nightmare' (Interviewee 1). The Education Acts of 2020 and 2021 worsened the long-term problems of the system while failing to respond to the effects of austerity and the new urgencies of the pandemic. The 'state' continued to 'demand of teachers that they take responsibility for managing the situation', instead of 'fulfilling its own obligations and remedying the injustice inflicted on schools and teachers by policies of austerity' (Interviewee 2). A collective spirit had been replaced by one in which 'merit became the basis for the distribution of educational reward' (Interviewee 3).

In their appreciation of New Democracy, interviewees were uniformly critical. They saw little room for rapprochement with its programme. They understood with clarity the scale of the difficulties with which the government presented them. However, as we shall see, they differed on the responses that might be made.

Future strategy

All tendencies agreed that the unions found themselves marginalised, the focus of what they saw as an organised attempt from the media and Government to present them as a 'special interest group' (Moe) and as an obstacle to necessary reform:

> They want to eradicate the unions. When the Government speaks about mobilisations they never mention the Unions as organisations with a discrete identity … they prefer to say 'some syndicalists said or did this, that or the other' … the government narrative and that of much of the media is we don't want to improve teaching … we don't care about education … we do not want to improve quality (Interviewee 5).

Their response to these challenges was a complex one, in which assertions about the continuing struggle were combined with a search for some form of renewal on a different policy basis. Across both unions and all tendencies, interviewees stressed how government policy post-2010 had 'radicalized teachers' (Interviewee 2) and increased levels of membership:

> teacher participation in the mobilization against evaluation reached 90 per cent … even teachers who have never been on demonstration participated in the recent mobilization [October 2021]. (Interviewee 6).

The majority tendency in the union leaderships hoped this level of participation could be sustained by a more developed culture of trade unionism, counteracting pressures from government and giving some purpose to trade unionism beyond mobilisation:

> For us it is very important to keep our members together … would you call this is syndicalism? … yes for us it is because it is important not to lose members … so we organized summer camps for the children of our members … it is crucial to keep our members together and to have their participation … (Interviewee 1).

Interviewees suggested that the unions had a newly acquired grasp of the ways in which industrial action needed to be accompanied by other kinds of activity, more 'ideological', with a greater capacity for policy development and a greater sense of the ways in which a trade union culture could be sustained:

> We want to maintain our ideological struggles … to protest for our rights but we also need to 'win' the argument by drawing on research evidence … (Interviewee 3).

On the basis that 'unions must once again be able to make a credible intervention in policy' and setting aside the difficulties presented by the authoritarian state (Interviewee 3), these interviewees aimed to 'fill the gaps in government policy' (Interviewee 5) through the work of the two unions' research centres and other research activities. In these activities, some interviewees claimed to see a 'maturing' (Interviewee 3) of teacher trade unionism, and its emergence as an autonomous force, no longer confined within the kind of close alliances with political parties that had been a feature of a factionalised trade union movement. This newly established distance would allow them to become more 'independent' (Interviewee 3), to raise their own voice about the concerns of their members, and in the process to abandon what some saw as the intellectual and political 'inflexibility' of the unions (ibid.). The inability to achieve change through industrial action would be compensated for by a repositioning of the unions as a credible voice in policy debates. To this extent, some of the themes of social movement trade unionism (Kelly 2018) were deployed as part of an effort to imagine a new position for unions, capable of forging a professional identity, developing a persuasive educational discourse and winning public support for it.

Other interviewees, from a left-wing position, were less hopeful: the tendencies close to SYRIZA and New Democracy had disparaged the real successes of the unions, notably the adjunct teachers' campaign, and encouraged during the 2015–2019 period the belief that 'people were tired and the appetite for struggle was less'. This conclusion, according to the Left, led directly towards the ineffective tactics that the unions adopted to deal with post-2019 reform.

In line with this perspective, some interviewees questioned the unions' policy of boycotting evaluation by asking their members to upload a union-composed template response to government requirements to report on the implementation of evaluation. This was seen as a defeatist tactic that accepted the right of government to collect data from schools. In reality, it was claimed 'there are no "innocent forms" … the government can now claim that most schools have engaged with evaluation' (Interviewee 6). The unions, rather than establishing an independent perspective, were being drawn into the government's agenda:

> the role of the union is to make people understand the problems with capitalism … privatisation and to mobilise them … the union cannot begin the other way around … that people are tired … that they cannot carry on in permanent mobilisation (Interviewee 7).

The majority union leaderships are criticised for offering only token resistance to the government policy agenda. But to develop an alternative is a project with its own problems:

> People I think understand the depth of the problems and changes that are required but they are unsure of what to do … (Interviewee 6).

Conclusion

The institutions of the state, its relation to social actors, its strategic direction and its capacity to bring about change are all influenced by social conflict (Poulantzas 1978). Since 2008, Greece has experienced an intensive period of conflict whose outcome has been the success of forces on the political right which aim to transform the relationship between the state, the economy and society. The executive state, which centralises policy-making at the same time as it protects it from popular influence, is an important element of that transformation (Kivotidis 2023). The new education state that is in the process of being constructed reflects such wider institutional changes and the new relationships and partnerships between social actors which they embody.

It is one of a number of policy and institutional changes, all premised on the idea that teacher unionism is a retrogressive force. Their effect has been to destabilise the identity of teacher unions

as political actors, calling into question the role which they had occupied since the metapolitefsi, the period of reform which followed the dictatorship.

This article has analysed the challenges posed by policy change to the historic status and current position of teacher trade unionism in Greece. It has discussed the terms in which they are interpreted by union cadres and the strategic rethinking towards which these cadres are led. Understanding teacher unions as politically diverse entities, it has explored the reasoning behind opposition to policies of evaluation as variously expressed by union leaderships and by oppositional tendencies on the unions' executive bodies. It has gone on to analyse the strategic options which they advocate. It has thus offered an analysis of strategies, as processes that are in formation, without as yet a clear direction or outcome.

Streeck and Hassel (2003) suggest that unions, faced with the powerful challenges of neoliberalism, have tended to make a policy withdrawal, away from major political questions towards issues more closely connected to collective bargaining. But Greece, at least in the education sector, has not yet witnessed such a shift. Unions continue to contest the remaking of the Greek education state, seeing reform as both a decisive political change and a threat to teachers' conditions. This two-fold understanding stems from unions' role in the post-dictatorship period, when they were participants in a movement of democratic reform, as much as they were engaged in economic struggle. In this respect, teacher trade unionism in Greece resembles that of other countries, notably in Southern Europe, where unions have been an active component both of movements for educational change and of efforts to raise the professional level and working conditions of their members. While it is true that the labour movement as a whole has generally possessed both an economic and a political agenda, it is arguable that the combination of the two is a particularly strong feature of teacher trade unionism, and this remains the case.

In their reflections on strategy, there is no argument among union tendencies about the scale of the changes they must deal with, nor about the threat they represent to the double mission of teacher trade unionism. The capacity of unions to defend their members' interests on matters of pay and conditions has been undermined, as has their influence on the objectives and processes of education. At worst, the determination of post-2019 governments not to negotiate with unions over the reforms it has introduced could be a step towards a prolonged process of 'depoliticisation', in which educational reform is represented as a technocratic process of improvement, rather than a matter for political debate (Kivotidis 2023).

How to respond to these changes remains an open question. No tendency argues for forsaking the unions' double mission. Differences between the tendencies centre on the means by which unions can retain an influence over rapidly developing educational processes. From the perspective of tendencies on the radical left, the post-2019 reforms should be met with uncompromising opposition, and an attempt to organise members much more effectively at school level. For the centre-right and centre-left tendencies, union strategy should aim to create spaces within the new policy framework in which teachers' interests can be advanced, at the same time as the unions promote alternatives to the reform programme, employing a framing discourse (Kelly et al.) which is different from that of government. Interviewees from the centre-left and centre-right tendencies were more likely than the left to display an interest in producing discursive challenges to neoliberalism, in alliance-building, in the construction of a collective professional identity. Interviewees from the left were more interested in what can be learned from social movement trade unionism about mobilising teachers and helping them to relate questions of working conditions to broader issues of capitalism and crisis.

Teacher unions are among those sites where what gets articulated is not only the critique of global policy reform but also the attempt to think through the problems of teacher unionism in ways which link policy arguments to collective action. In Greece, as a result of both of the historic significance of the 'democratic school', and the radicalisation that occurred in the post-2008 period, these debates are especially lively. Thus analysis of Greek union perspectives contributes to the

understanding not just of the dilemmas of teacher trade unionism but of the ways in which trade unions are attempting to respond to them.

Notes

1. After the 2019 elections SYRIZA altered its name to 'SYRIZA-Progressive Alliance'.
2. Anna Diamantopoulou, Minister of Education, PASOK, 2009–2012.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by BA/Leverhulme Small Research Grants: (grant number SRG1819\191004).

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