

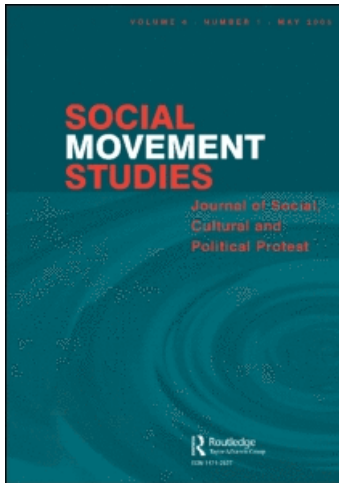
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The Protest Cycle of Spring 2010 in Greece

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PROFILE

The Protest Cycle of Spring 2010 in Greece

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ABSTRACT *The spring 2010 mass demonstrations in Greece, against the austerity plans imposed by the national government, point to certain new features of collective action for trade-union mobilizations. Here, we profile the conditions and the content of these mobilizations, and analyse the latter, aiming to show that they are forms of social protest which Tarrow calls a 'mobilization phase of a cycle of contention'. We argue that these forms have enabled social movement actors to overcome – even temporarily – the historically rooted basic weaknesses of organization, collaboration and co-ordination in the Greek trade-union movement.*

KEY WORDS: Demonstrations, strikes, trade unions, collective action, protest cycle, Greece

From the end of winter to the beginning of summer in 2010, a huge wave of mass demonstrations with remarkable features developed across Greece. They took the form of a set of mobilizations that were concerned with the defence of the insurance, salary and income rights of workers and employees. The aim of this article is to describe and explain these demonstrations in order to show that they are integrated in a new and distinctive 'protest cycle'.

The Protest Cycle

Tarrow defined a cycle of contention as

a phase of heightened conflict across the social system: with a rapid diffusion of collective action from more mobilized to less mobilized sectors; a rapid pace of innovation in the forms of contention; the creation of new or transformed collective action frames; a combination of organized and unorganized participation; and sequences of intensified information flow and interaction between challengers and authorities (Tarrow 1998, p. 142).

According to Tarrow (1998, p. 144), the mobilization phase of a cycle of contention is characterized by a generalization of conflict that begins with the opening of new political opportunities which, on the one hand, encourage the creation of objective or explicit coalitions between disparate actors while, on the other hand, reinforcing instability in the elite. Moreover, during this phase, the routine rejection by the state of the claims of the

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'early-risers' encourages other claimants to adopt them, thus broadening political opportunities for new actions.

This happens because the early demands in a cycle of contention do three important things. They highlight the vulnerability of authorities to contention; they challenge the interests of other contenders, either by claiming part of their resources or by attacking directly the interests of an established group and they contribute to the creation of new 'master frames' that enhance convergences between different challengers (Tarrow 1998). Thus, Tarrow distinguishes six features that normally characterize periods of the mobilization phase of a cycle of contention:

heightened conflict, broad sectoral and geographic diffusion, the expansion of the repertoire of contention, the appearance of new organizations and the empowerment of old ones, the creation of new master frames linking the actions of disparate groups to one another, and intensified interaction between challengers and the state, leading to particular state responses a key pivoting role in determining which direction the cycle will take (Tarrow 1998).

The mass protests in Greece correspond to the features that Tarrow believes a mobilization phase of a 'cycle of contention' includes. More precisely, they opened a mobilization phase of such a 'cycle of contention', whose end is completely unknown for the time being, insofar as this phase is still in progress. We will also try to illustrate that multiple, heterogeneous and contradictory forms of collective action have developed within the frame of this mobilization phase, without the development of a prevalence of any of these forms; that is, in this phase, an open field of social interaction with multiple actors and completely uncertain outcomes has been produced.

Previous Mass Mobilizations in Greece

Let us begin with an examination of other important protests that have taken place in Greece in recent years. Some of them are important because they are forms of large-scale reaction to political choices of the governments of that period or to the facts of cruel suppression. These are (a) the demonstrations against the visit to Greece of then US President Clinton in November 1999; (b) the demonstrations, the rallies and the sit-ins against the privatization of part of the Greek Higher Education system in winter 2007 and (c) the movement that developed between December 2008 and the beginning of 2009 during the youth revolt after the killing of 16-year old Alexis Grigoropoulos by a policeman. Such mobilizations are significant because they have revealed the conflicting practices of social groups that have each reacted dynamically to specific conjunctures. However, they do not form actions that can be compared with the 2010 protest cycle, as they were developed either within a period of intense politicization of action (the Clinton protests case) or during the mobilization of one or specific social groups (the other protests) that performed the majority of the action.

Yet there are other, older, sets of mobilizations that have certain similar morphological characteristics with the spring 2010 protest cycle. Nevertheless, these mobilizations were, again, on a much smaller scale, with smaller conflicting viabilities, much shorter life spans and, more importantly, without considerable evidence of renewal in their organization and their repertoires of action. These previous mobilizations are first, a short but intense strike outbreak and corresponding demonstrations of the trade unions against 'Giannitsi's Social

Insurance Bill' in April 2001, which led to its withdrawal and to the resignation of the Minister of Labour and Social Insurance of the Socialist government (i.e. Giannitsis). This helped the Greek General Confederation of Labour (GGCL) to recover an important part of its credibility, which it had lost during the previous years due to its passivity. Second, the strikes that broke out on the same issue in spring 2002. In both these cases, the leading group of PASKE (a trade-union party affiliated with the Socialist Party), which was the majority in the leading bodies of central trade-union confederations in both the private sector (GGCL) and the public sector (ADEDY, Advanced Administration of Civil Servants Unions), was accused by Left Organizations of having undermined the strike mobilizations through its conciliatory attitude. Third, in winter 2007, large-scale strikes broke out against two successive pieces of proposed legislation on insurance funds. The current protest cycle, as we will see, not only shares certain common elements with these protests but also differs in some key ways.

Economic Austerity Measures in the Spring of 2010

The mobilization began with strike actions across Greece on 25 February 2010. These were triggered by the tough austerity plan that Papandreou's Socialist Government had decided to implement, in an attempt to tackle the worst economic crisis in the recent history of the country. More specifically, on 3 March 2010, the Government announced a first raft of economic measures, which would come into effect retrospectively from 1 January 2010 in an attempt to halt the decline of the country in the international markets. The Government was then accused of having forgotten its pre-election promises to impose taxation on the rich and of having decided to overburden all citizens with taxation instead. Through the increase in taxes on consumption, the middle- and low-income strata were the most significantly affected by the Government's choice of action, which had also, more significantly, gone ahead without having ensured essential help from the EU partners.

On 23 April, one and half months after the announcement of the first austerity plan, the Government announced the recourse to a stabilization mechanism created by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Union. This recourse was to be accompanied, of course, by new austerity measures that were announced on 2 May and imposed by the stabilization mechanism itself so that Greece's recourse to it would be accepted by both the IMF and the EU. The rafts of measures included the following:

- (1) *Public sector.* A freeze pay for all workers and state pensioners and a huge reduction in salaries and pensions; a scrapping of annual bonus payments and other bonuses; the suspension of public sector; contract workers were set to lose their jobs; a prevention of early retirement; the setting of the retirement age at 65 years for both men and women and a rise in the minimum number of years someone would have to work to qualify for a full pension.
- (2) *Private sector.* The legal maximum number of people that companies could lay off each month would be doubled from 2 to 4%, and lower levels of compensation for those who had been made unemployed would also be implemented.
- (3) *General.* VAT to be increased and indirect taxes to be raised on all commodities; presumptions on maintenance costs for cars and real estate to be

introduced; state expenditure on education to be considerably decreased and, in the longer term, many public industries to be privatized.

The Protests of the Spring of 2010

The mass reactions started before the official announcement of the first of the austerity measures (3 March 2010). On 10 February 2010, the first major 24-hour public sector strike announced by ADEDY had unprecedented high rates of participation, reaching an average of 85%. Two weeks later, on 24 February, a general strike in the public and private sectors broke out, with roughly 30,000–40,000 public servants demonstrating their opposition to the austerity measures in the centre of Athens in two separate rallies: that of GGCL and ADEDY, and that of PAME (affiliated with the Greek Communist Party). Separate rallies also took place in Thessaloniki. While the rally in Athens was in progress, there were confrontations and clashes between the groups of young demonstrators and the riot police.

Immediately following the announcement of the first measures, both of the two biggest parties of the Left (the Greek Communist Party and the Coalition of Radical Left) and the leaders of the two biggest confederations in private and public sectors (GGCL and ADEDY) called for mobilizations. On 5 March, the two main confederations announced a 24-hour general strike in which all mass transportation workers, schoolteachers, university teachers, hospital doctors, journalists and others also participated. In Athens, in addition to the usual clashes between riot police and (mainly) young demonstrators, unusual events were taking place: first, the riot police attack on a historical figure of the Left, Manolis Glezos (a very well-known figure in Greece for his heroic action of taking down the Nazi Flag from the Acropolis in May 1941, when he was only 19 years old); second, the verbal and physical attack that the President of the GGCL received from tens of left-wing demonstrators who accused him of following a conciliatory policy and, third, the efforts of Parliament employees to prevent the deputies of the Coalition of Radical Left to raise a banner of protest outside the Greek Parliament. The incidents were generalized with clashes in front of the Parliament and a spontaneous rally of demonstrators outside the Ministry of Labour. Dozens of demonstrators were injured and arrested, while the pensioners' unions also decided to participate in those rallies.

On 11 March, a 24-hour general strike and rallies were organized by the two main confederations, with extensive clashes of police and demonstrators, whereas PAME organized its own separate rallies in numerous cities. The Executive Committee of European Trade Union Confederation published a resolution of solidarity with Greek workers and employees. On the 16 and 17 March, the Federation of workers in the National Power Company (DEH) declared a 48-hour strike.

During April, a 'storm' of strikes and demonstrations was observed throughout the country against austerity measures such as the Tax Bill, the flexibilization of labour relations and redundancies. Tens of strikes (many of which were 48-hour strikes) and work stoppages took place, in which hundreds of thousand workers from all professions, occupations and walks of life participated: from the vendors in the street markets and the taxi drivers to magistrates and pilots of the Hellenic Air Forces. There was a flurry of dissimilar strike mobilizations: general strikes organized by the confederations, sector-based strikes organized by federations and individual associations, local strikes organized by the local working centres and local and general strikes organized by federations,

associations and working centres that disagreed with the general confederations and were influenced either by the Greek Communist Party or by the radical left. The mass demonstrations and rallies had an even more complex structure, since in those demonstrations new and particularly dynamic trade-union organizations participated (e.g. the Co-ordination of First Degree Associations of Public and Private Sectors) along with new political formations (e.g. Front of Solidarity and Subversion). Moreover, neighbourhood committees and open citizen assemblies were quick to activate and organize in order to resist the austerity measures, and claim the free use of public spaces and the protection of the environment. Initiatives of citizens against inflation were organized, with activist actions taking place mainly in the supermarkets and on public transport, in addition to local initiatives such as the co-ordination of workers into their own blocks in the mass protests. An important element in those demonstrations, something that would be confirmed later in the mobilizations, was the participation of many individuals who were not organized within trade-union parties.

During May, fewer but very critical demonstrations took place, from the point of view of both the intensity and the range of mobilizations, as well as enabling social researchers to evaluate and verify new qualitative data concerning the overall participation in the mobilizations of that period. First, on the anniversary of 1 May, there was the usual split between the rallies of the forces of the Left and the leaders of main trade-union confederations and the Working Centre of Athens, in addition to the split within the fractious Greek Left between the Greek Communist party on the one hand, and the Coalition of Radical Left and the Extra-Parliamentary Left on the other, despite the official call from the President of the Coalition for a common celebration. The 'conventional' event of clashes between anti-authoritarian groups of young people and the riot police, and the consequent tens of arrests, also took place. The two 'unconventional' elements of the 1 May protests were the attack that the former chairman of the Parliament and leading member of the Socialist Party, Kaklamanis, received from a group of demonstrators, and the fact that there was wide participation from people who were generally not used to taking part in demonstrations, demanding the unification of the separate rallies and the overcoming of the dividing lines in the ranks of the Left. Despite the fact that people participated in separate rallies, lots of those participants voiced their will to overcome the split.

The demonstrations that took place in many Greek cities during the general strike of 5 May were the largest and most dynamic demonstrations for economic demands that have taken place in the last 35 years, with the rally in Athens reported to have had 150,000 demonstrators. Strike participation levels reached 90% in most branches of the public sector, and reportedly 100% in many branches of the private sector (*Ethnos* 6 May 2010). Unfortunately, this rally became internationally known for the death of three bank employees, as some demonstrators set fire to a branch of Marfin Bank in central Athens. To some extent, these deaths reduced participation in the following demonstrations; nevertheless, the demonstrations continued during the months of May and June, with either general or sector-based strikes.

Features of the New Protest Cycle

The new qualitative features of these protests were shaped progressively from the start of the period, tending to support the view that the mobilizations constitute a new protest

cycle, if we follow Tarrow's criteria, set out above. But let us examine these features. Seven factors are of particular interest. First, there was an unprecedented geographical spread for demonstrations with economic demands. Thus, the rallies in Athens, Thessaloniki, Patras, Volos, Larissa, Heraklion, Chania, Mitilini, Giannena and Corfu were particularly intense and resulted in numerous riots, injuries and arrests.

Second, in order to understand why the strike participation rates were so exceptional, we need to take into account that in Greece there is an exceptionally low level of trade-union density (specifically in the private sector, where membership under the age of 29 years is almost non-existent); employment levels are low, compared to the rest of Europe and, naturally, there are intense political and personal disputes within the trade unions, which are organizationally fragmented and economically dependent on the state.

Third, the complementary repertoires of aggressive action which were deployed went beyond the standards of classical peaceful trade-union demonstrations (for example, the hanging of a protest banner in the Acropolis by the Communist syndicalists, sit-ins of working centres by anti-authoritarian demonstrators, the refusal to comply with price increases on the public transport system through 'self-reduction' in the price of public bus tickets by members of radical Left and militant actions by previously non-political citizens; see *Eleftherotypia* 6 May 2010). They thus offered what Tarrow (1998, p. 145) calls 'new weapons of social protest'. Furthermore, the demonstrators who tried to force entry into the Greek Parliament were more heterogeneous than might be expected; that is, the demonstrators were not simply anarchists but also people who neither belonged to a political party nor the official blocks of confederations and partisans of the parties of the Left (*Eleftherotypia* 9 May 2010).

The fourth factor is that grass-roots associations in the field of casualized work were able to organize dynamically, while more established associations in the public and the private sectors were able to coordinate their action, producing greater levels of radicalization.

Fifth, the older trade unions (the two main confederations, the Communist-led PAME) emerged from the protests with their status enhanced, and with part of their credibility recovered.

Sixth, given the deep political, social and ideological heterogeneity of the groups participating in the demonstrations, and the existence of contrasting and contradictory claims (from the abrogation of some of the austerity measures to the exit of the country from the Eurozone and the adoption of a different model of economic growth), a 'master frame' was necessary to link their actions and justify collective action. This master frame flowed effortlessly from the legitimation crisis of the institutional political system itself. The general picture that supported it is that the major political parties had created a corrupt system of power, based on intertwining political and economic interests, bribery and intrigues. The master frame was thus articulated on the corruption of politics, symbolic localized of in the Parliament; the central slogans were: 'we are tens, we are many, today we will all get into the Parliament' and 'Burn, burn the brothel called Parliament'.

Finally, there was indeed intensified interaction among challengers as well as between challengers and authorities, which was expressed mainly through conflicts between the political and economic elites (with the latter holding that full responsibility for the crisis lay with the political elite, and a consensus forming around need for Greece to withdraw from the Eurozone), in conflict over the highly repressive response of the State (as expressed through the rough treatment of the demonstrators by the police throughout the

mobilizations); and to a certain degree, through increasingly reciprocal relations between the grass roots of the Communist trade-union parties and the Coalition of Radical Left.

Thus, from the end of the winter up until the late spring of 2010, a new protest cycle opened. Mass participation, new groups and organizations, multiple and contradictory demands, aggressive tactics and complex interactions are some of the elements that were developed in this phase. These interactions allowed the protesting social actors to overcome – albeit perhaps temporarily – the historically rooted basic weaknesses of organization, collaboration and co-ordination of the trade-union movement in the country. Different orientations of collective action, such as competition, deviance, social movements, individual resistance and reaction (Melucci, 1996, pp. 30–34) – to name a few – took place simultaneously, without any of them prevailing over the rest – until now. The game is afoot. It is hard to judge whether the protest cycle will carry on, at least, with the same features. Most likely the continuation of austerity measures will keep on generating collective reactions. Nevertheless, it is difficult to know in advance which form these reactions will take and which orientations of collective action – if any – will dominate.

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