

Developments and workers' struggles in the Greek textile industry, 2005



Mobilizations in the Greek Textile Industry

During the last decade, 44.000 jobs were lost in the greek textile industry.¹ 28.700 workers have been sacked only in 2003 and 2004. Production in this specific industry is carried out through the use of obsolete machinery, piece work and a large workforce and thus it is based on “intensity of labour”. Since profits are based on the low labour cost, it comes as no surprise that with the opening up of the neighbouring countries’ markets, which had been out of reach for the western capital for long, capital moved where it could achieve a better rate of profit. Production is relocated to Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania and Romania where wages may be even 10 times smaller (the average gross wage reaches up to 1000 euros in Greece, whereas in the other Balkan countries it’s around 120 euros). 3.500 greek textile companies operate in Bulgaria alone and almost every piece work workplace has been relocated.²

Accounts given by Bulgarian unionists³ draw a rather depressing picture of the working conditions there: many factories operate on a 24 hour basis, Christmas bonus and holiday pay are being withheld, and there is no full pay leave. Incidents have been reported about confinement of the workers in the factories through the locking of doors by the administration till the workers end a certain amount of products. At the same time, state inspections of working conditions are actually nonexistent.

The factory closures should be seen in the context of the labour policies put forward by the greek state in the previous years. The ongoing reforms of labour legislation continuously aim to reduce labour costs, through relaxing rules of dismissal and by introducing provisions for

¹ Most of the textile factories are located in cities in northern Greece. One of the most prominent is Naousa, which was called “Manchester of the Balkans” since the first textile factory in the Balkans was built there in 1874. Nowadays, unemployment in these areas has risen up to the level of 30%. Especially in Naousa this figure goes up to 50% during wintertime.

² The state of things is not very different in other industries as well (shoe, food, paper, tobacco, wood). Employment has fallen by 30% in the wood / furniture industry, 15% in the food / liquor industry and 20 % in the tobacco industry.

³ The establishment of contacts between the textile union of the Petritsi city in Bulgaria, where many factories have been relocated and the textile union of Thessaloniki was an important development. Data used in this article about working conditions in Bulgaria come partially from that source.

the extension and non-payment of overtime work as well as for the flexibilization of labour in general. The companies that were subsidized by the state for supposedly productive investments have in fact used the money for relocation, while they have reduced their workforce making use of the advantageous new regulations for easier dismissals and voluntary retirements.

Recently, the Union of Northern Greece Industrialists proposed to the government the creation of a “Free Trade Zone” near the northern borders so that the wave of relocations be restrained. Their true aim is, on the one hand, to reduce relocation costs and, on the other hand, to exploit the labour power of foreign workers inside Greece on the terms of their home countries as far as wages and social security are concerned.

Workers’ response to closures and relocation has been unsuccessful and inadequate. While factories were closing one after the other, the workers could not manage to form a community of struggle and practical solidarity actions beyond the local level were largely taken a day after the fact. For example, last year when the workers of an occupied textile factory (Tricolan) in Naousa tried to get in touch with the workers of another textile factory in Thrace [a region near Bulgaria] belonging to the same owner they were confronted with indifference or even fear. What’s remarkable about this story is the fact that it is very possible that the workers of the factory in Thrace will also face a closure very soon.

Nevertheless, the textile workers of Naousa, which is one of the cities most severely affected by closures and relocation, went on a large number of mobilizations during the previous year. The mobilizations ranged from road blocks, demonstrations and 24-hour solidarity strikes organized by the local union branch to their culmination with the occupation of the Tricolan factory last November. On the 31st of October 2004 the workers of Tricolan occupied the factory and refused to turn it over to the boss unless their following demands were satisfied:

1. A 3000 euro allowance for each worker
2. Unemployment benefits equal to their last wages until they could find a new job.
3. Recognition of the unemployment period for retirement pension.
4. Additional financial aid to families with student members.
5. Funding of the housing loans by the National Organization of Worker Housing.
6. A 5 years reduction of the age of retirement.

The most interesting point about these specific demands is the fact that every worker who is thrown out because of closures can relate to them, as well as other unemployed workers. But the occupation of Tricolan remained relatively isolated. There were no other militant strikes or occupations and so it eventually ended on the 25th of November 2004.

There were some developments during August and September this year in the city of Naoussa. Klonatex, a company belonging to the same owner as Tricolan, announced the closure of two more factories, Olympiaki and B’ Klostiria Naoussis, employing 110 workers. The Workers’ Center of Naoussa responded with the declaration of three 24-hour general strikes: one on 5th of August, another one on 11th of August and the most recent one on 23rd

of September. The strikes were quite successful as far as participation of workers is concerned. All the textile factories and the municipal services remained idle on these days; many people (even high school students, construction workers and packaging factory workers) participated in the demos organized on the 5th of August and the 23rd of September in the city of Naoussa and on the 11th of August in Veria, the local capital. Also, small workshops and small retail stores closed down in the area, in solidarity with the strikes since the whole local economy is affected dramatically by the very high rate of unemployment (34 percent). Despite the mobilizations, the administration of the factories has declared its determination to close them unless “a spectacular and unforeseen solution [sic!] is found”. The real meaning of that is the suspension of the operation of one of the factories since they claim that their productive functions overlap. On the 22nd of September the textile union organized in Naoussa a national meeting of textile workers from factories in Athens, Thessaloniki, Preveza and Evros where similar events are taking place.

In Athens, the underwear company “Sex Form” has stopped paying its workers since the middle of July. On the 29th of August, the 250 workers of “Sex Form” decided to go on strike demanding immediate payment and guarantees for the continuation of the operation of the factory as the administration is constantly blackmailing them with dismissals and relocation to Bulgaria. Working conditions in the factory have deteriorated in the last years with intense work rates, low wages and humiliating checks against product theft. At the same time the owner of the company has received generous subsidies from the state. The administration of the company has managed to persuade 50 of the 250 workers to scab. Since the beginning of September the strikers have begun a long struggle with demos and continuous picketing outside the factory trying to persuade the scab workers to join the struggle. They have also organized public meetings at the municipal cultural center. The highest point of the struggle was on the 26th of September when the strikers blocked the entrance of the factory to prevent its operation. That day the production stopped and the administration called the police special forces to break the blockage. At the same time, the scab workers sued their colleagues for “preventing them to work”! There was an immediate response by the strikers who called an assembly outside the police station. According to some accounts, the trade unionists have undermined the mobilizations since they have accepted to participate in common meetings with a committee of the scab workers at the Ministry of Labour. The same accounts hold the union responsible for preventing more radical actions proposed by some workers as well as saving the owner of the company from lynching by the strikers on the 6th of September. Local militants from the leftist and the antiauthoritarian milieu have organized solidarity actions in the area.

Similar developments are taking place in Thessaloniki as well. A textile company opened up a new factory employing 300 workers in Bulgaria and threatens to close two factories (Ergo-Textil and Ergo-Iliofin) employing 320 workers in Thessaloniki unless new loans are provided with the aid of the state. Moreover, the company stopped paying wages two months ago. Workers of both factories have gone on strike since 19th of September and in the case of Ergo-Iliofin they have also occupied the factory, demanding an allowance of 3000 euros for each worker as an immediate aid for the satisfaction of their basic needs. Furthermore, one more factory (Voulinos S.A.) ceased its operation in September because of a 15.000 euro debt

to the electricity company. The workers of this factory also went on strike at the end of September demanding immediate government intervention for the restart of its operation. On the 27th of September, a meeting among the workers of the three factories was organized in the Workers' Center of Thessaloniki with the participation of representatives of the textile union. Two days later, on the 29th, the workers demonstrated in the streets of Thessaloniki. Militants from the leftist and the antiauthoritarian milieu participated in the demo.

Finally, in the city of Preveza, one more factory (Klostiria Prevezis) stopped its operation in September as workers didn't agree with the dismissal of 42 employees. The dismissals were considered by the administration to be 'essential' for the continuation of the factory operation. The workers in this factory have not been paid for the last 4 months and we should note that many of them are near the age of retirement. However, this particular factory will restart its operation since the solution of subsidized voluntary retirements complemented with immediate payment of the wages was agreed in a meeting among workers' representatives, the factory administration and government officials.

All the above examples illustrate a situation that is rather gloomy for the working class in the textile industry. Workers respond to the closures with demonstrations, strikes and occupations but they seem incapable to reverse these developments by appealing to other parts of the working class and generalizing the struggle.

TPTG and friends

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