

Getting together or breaking apart? Trade union strategies, restructuring and contingent workers in Southern Europe

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Keywords: Contingent employment; Trade union strategies; Telecommunications industry; Italy; Greece.

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Introduction

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, the telecommunications industry across Europe went through important structural shifts, underpinned by liberalization, privatization and technological change (Batt et al., 2009). As a result, work and production were restructured, and the trade unions were faced with the strategic challenge of responding to this new reality. An added complexity was the increased use of contingent workers in the industry, especially in call centres - a sector that epitomises characteristics of low-wage work in new service activities (Russell, 2008). The introduction of precarious workers in the labour process undercut agreed collective agreements and posed a threat to the core workforce. Faced with this challenge, the trade unions had to decide how to accommodate the rise of atypical employment in their structures and strategic plans. As is well known by the literature, in those early years, responses across Europe varied. The German unions, for instance, decided to follow a strategy of exclusion or tacit acceptance (Holst, 2008; Shire et al., 2009), whereas the Dutch and Austrian unions adopted a more inclusive approach (Jaarsveld et al., 2009; Shire et al., 2009).

The institutional environment has been suggested to influence the way unions respond to strategic challenges from the external environment (Czarzasty et al., 2014; Doellgast, Nohara, et al., 2009). Other authors, however, have focused on the role of the unions' power resources and internal organisational politics as possible explanations (Benassi and Dorigatti, 2015; Benassi and Vlandas, 2015; Gumbrell McCormick, 2011). Although there is an abundant literature on the responses of trade unions to contingent employment and the factors underlying their behaviour (Heery,

2009), our understanding of why unions may favour one strategy over another remains controversial.

The aim of this article is to explore this issue in more detail, by focusing on the strategic responses of the Italian and Greek telecommunications unions to the challenges of restructuring and the growth of contingent labour. Italy and Greece share many common institutional characteristics and the telecommunications industry in both countries has gone through similar structural changes. Despite this, the strategic responses of the unions in the two cases differed. On the one hand, the trade unions in Italy pursued inclusive strategies embracing the call-centre workers and negotiating the restructuring of the industry. On the other hand, their counterparts in Greece adopted a policy of exclusion and negotiated only the incumbent operator's restructuring.

To better appreciate the aforementioned variation in the strategic choices of the unions, we conducted a historical case study analysis, utilising archival material from various primary and secondary sources (such as newspapers, trade union publications and EIRO reports); supplemented by interviews with key actors in the telecommunications trade unions in Italy and Greece. The article, therefore, presents novel empirical material from two case studies that belong to the Southern European employment regime (Holman, 2013: 492), which is an under-researched institutional context in the broader call-centre literature. This line of inquiry is even timelier in the context of the current crisis that exacerbates phenomena of precarious and low paid employment in EU's periphery (O'Sullivan and Royle, 2014).

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Theoretical background

Recent years have witnessed the growth of contingent labour, rendering the ‘traditional worker with a standard employment contract...a declining species’ and making ‘insecurity...the new normality’ (Gumbrell McCormick and Hyman, 2013: 33). The call centre industry features prominently in this new reality of flexibility and insecurity, by employing large numbers of part-time and agency workers who usually work side-by-side to the core workforce. The liberalization and privatization of the telecommunications industry took place across the developed world during the 1990s and 2000s. These structural shifts exacerbated the problems and challenges that the co-existence of a peripheral and core workforce posed for the labour movement and the organization of work (Doellgast, 2008; Doellgast, Nohara, et al., 2009; Ramirez et al., 2007). Trade unions in the US and several EU countries were presented with new strategic dilemmas as to how to react to the re-organisation of work and of the production process. Additionally, the trade unions had to seriously consider how to deal with the advent of atypical workers, whose interests were perceived as being non-coincidental with that of their existing members.

The initial responses to the latter dilemma ranged from exclusion of the contingent workers from the trade unions’ structures, to the subordination of their interests to these of the core workforce (Gumbrell McCormick, 2011; Heery, 2009). Atypical workers were quite often used as ‘buffers’ by the trade unions in their negotiations with the employers, to advance and protect the interests of their traditional membership (Heery, 2004). This attitude could partly be explained by the fact that the interests and needs of the temporary workers did not necessarily coincide with that of

the core workforce, whose 'secure position [rested] on the insecurity of the former' (Heery, 2004: 441). It can also be partly explained by the implications that the inclusion of atypical workers could have on the structure of the unions (Gumbrell McCormick, 2011; MacKenzie, 2010). Although unions across the EU responded to the challenge of contingent labour differently, a common element in their approach was that they were less concerned about representation than about opposing this kind of work *per se* (Gumbrell McCormick, 2011: 298).

Yet in time the attitude of the trade unions started to change. The unions realized that atypical work became an important and permanent characteristic of the labour market. In fact, many contingent workers, especially women, preferred this status to the more typical one (Gumbrell McCormick, 2011: 298) and therefore, exclusion and subordination gave its place to inclusion and engagement (Heery, 2009). Increasingly, unions began to accept the status and the interests of atypical workers as legitimate and sought to represent them both at the national and company level. They did so by recruiting them as part of their organizing campaigns and many scholars went as far as to argue that the distinctiveness of their interests required 'tailored systems of representation' (Heery, 2009: 431). That way many unions addressed the problems that the inclusion of atypical workers could have posed to the existing structures, since organizing them 'into an entirely separate union is structurally easier than accommodating them within existing union bodies' (Gumbrell McCormick, 2011: 302).

Recruiting and organizing contingent workers, and bargaining on their behalf, were two of the various trade unions' strategic responses to the advent of flexible

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employment. Other strategies included the participation of union officials in various networks that supported people who were usually employed in this kind of jobs (e.g. mainly women, youth and migrants). Additional strategies involved coalition-building with NGOs and community organizations and the provision of services tailored to atypical workers. Finally, unions took direct action to alter and improve the legal framework that regulated flexible work through the lobbying of the government and other political parties (Conley and Stewart, 2008; Gumbrell McCormick, 2011; Heery, 2009; Heery et al., 2003; Pernicka, 2005).

Why did the trade unions respond this way and what determined their decision to include or exclude atypical workers? One may distinguish between the macro-factors, which focus primarily on the institutional environment, and the micro-factors, which examine in more detail the internal organisational forces that shape the unions' strategic choices.

As previously mentioned, the rise of contingent work in recent years was undoubtedly an important push factor, since growth of this type of employment created a demand for representation (Benassi and Dorigatti, 2015; Fiorito and Jarley, 2012; Heery, 2009). Yet this fact alone cannot account for the dynamics in the changing attitudes of unions towards atypical workers (moving, that is, from exclusion and subordination to engagement). It also cannot account for the choice of particular strategies (i.e. organizing, or political representation). To better address this issue, a considerable body of literature has focused on the importance and the effects of the institutional environment on trade union strategies (Czarzasty et al., 2014; Fiorito and Jarley, 2012; Holst, 2008).

Institutions define the 'structure of opportunities and constraints in which union organizations formulate their strategic choices and interact with other actors', and influence the union's identity (Benassi and Dorigatti, 2015: 4). The trade unions' response to the challenge of restructuring and the advent of contingent labour is determined by the opportunities for strategic action the institutional context provides. Different structures for the expression of collective voice give rise to quite different reactions to restructuring (Doellgast, 2010: 391). As Doellgast (2008: 284) rightly argues, 'worker representatives remain embedded in their respective political and economic environment and are dependent on labour laws and bargaining arrangements to gain advantage at the bargaining table' (see also Doellgast, Nohara, et al., 2009). Indeed, the structure of the national industrial relations system (Gumbrell McCormick, 2011) and of collective bargaining in particular (Czarzasty et al., 2014) inform the strategies of unions with respect to contingent labour. As Holst (2008: 41) has demonstrated, the structure of collective bargaining in Austria allowed telecommunication unions to bargain collectively without requiring much grassroots support. By contrast, their German counterparts had to engage into rank-and-file recruitment and mobilization to force employers into collective bargaining. Moreover, the decentralization and deregulation of collective bargaining across Europe meant that many unions operating in a context of liberalization had to shift from an enterprise union logic to an industry-wide logic (Benassi and Dorigatti, 2015). This is why they began attracting and mobilizing members in a micro-organizational context (Czarzasty et al., 2014; Heery, 2009).

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The role of the national and industry level unions is important in this respect. This was certainly true in the case of the US (Fiorito and Jarley, 2012). It was also true in many European countries, whose industrial relations system depended on the resources and strategies that federations and confederations would decide to devote in representing atypical employees (Czorzasty et al., 2014). Yet the institutional context alone cannot always account for the unions’ decision to choose one strategy over another. As Holst (2008: 27) observes, ‘institutions endow trade unions with specific constraints [but] they do not prescribe their behavior’. To better appreciate the choice of a specific strategy one also needs to consider the micro-foundations of the unions’ behaviour.

Central in this debate is the role of union identity and union ideology in framing its actions (Gumbrell McCormick, 2011). As Heery (2009: 440) argues, in recent years the trade unions’ perception of contingent labour changed considerably. This happened through the development of a new discourse regarding the position of contingent workers that helped framing their interests in a more positive light. This was the result of both direct pressure from atypical workers and indirect pressure from the women’s movement, as well as grass root mobilization by local union leaders (Czorzasty et al., 2014). Combined with the general trend of membership decline, union leaders became more open to the contingent workers’ concerns, especially since they constituted an important pool of new members.

Although a union’s identity can shape its response towards certain categories of workers, the way it will influence its overall strategy depends more on the size and the quality of its power resources, as well as the internal organizational politics and

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3 conflicts. Benassi and Dorigatti (2015) argue, for example, that if the union's
4 institutional and organizational power resources are low, it will opt for a strategy of
5 inclusiveness or subordination. If, on the other hand, its institutional and
6 organizational power resources are stable, it will opt for a strategy of subordination
7 and alliance with the management (*ibid*). This may indeed be true in some cases, such
8 as in Germany or Britain, where the unions had realized that the non-inclusion of
9 atypical workers could lead to a decline of their ability to act (Gumbrell McCormick,
10 2011). But it does not necessarily hold true for every case, because this argument
11 presupposes that strong membership is fundamental to a union's power.
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24 While numbers are important, the mobilization literature (Kelly, 1998) suggested that
25 one may be able to achieve results even with low membership, as long as one is able
26 to successfully mobilize one's existing members. Moreover, a union can draw power
27 from other sources as well, which suggests that there are different categories of union
28 power (Gumbrell McCormick and Hyman, 2013). The type of workers the union
29 organizes provides it with structural power, which increases the more skilled and
30 specialized its members are. Moreover, a strong and inspiring ideology establishes a
31 moral or communicative power, which can be used to successfully mobilize its
32 members. Additionally, its collaborative or coalitional power, i.e. the union's ability
33 to form alliances across society (Frege and Kelly, 2003), be it with the state or NGOs,
34 may also be utilized without necessarily the need to directly involve its rank-and-file
35 in any action. Similarly, the smart use of resources – its strategic or logistical power
36 – may prove important in a context of scarce resources. Finally, the institutional
37 environment *per se* can be a source of power; but as Gumbrell McCormick and
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Hyman (2013: 31) argue, this kind of power ‘may prove precarious in the long run... [as the] unions may face a choice between defending their institutional status or recovering their representational capacity’.

Identifying a union’s power resources may help one better appreciate *how* a union may act under certain circumstances. Since power is limited, unions must need to make a strategic decision regarding the rational allocation of their power resources to achieve the maximum outcomes. This decision will be based on an appreciation of the ability of their existing power bases to help them reach their goals. If a union reckons that it does not have enough power to achieve its aims then it may decide to invest in building up new power resources. This implies that a union may decide against expanding its membership base – by representing for instance precarious workers – if it deems that the benefits of doing so may not necessarily outweigh the costs. Instead, it may focus on developing or utilizing other types of power. If, for example, a union believes that it can achieve its strategic goals by utilizing its coalition or structural power, it may have little incentive to mobilize alternative power sources.

The key in the above analysis is to understand how the unions articulate their goals and what determines the decision to either use the existing power bases or to develop new power bases. Both these elements can help explain *whether* a union will engage into certain actions – for instance, to represent atypical workers or to engage in negotiations regarding the restructuring of its sector. The outcome of these decisions depends on the union’s internal organizational politics (Anonymous) and the quality of its internal democracy. Unions are not monolithic organizations, but represent collective organizations that synthesise different ideologies and factions whose co-

existence may rest on a fragile balance. An appreciation of the dynamics that develop at the leadership level, and within its various decision-making bodies, is an important empirical question that can help us better appreciate a trade union's strategic choices.

As a concluding remark, the decision to encompass a particular strategy, and thus utilize one's restricted power sources, depends on the bargaining setting in which the union finds itself, or the behaviour of its major interlocutors – the state and the management. Operating within an adversarial context will require a different mix of power resources than if operating in a collaborative environment. The union's ability to control, or engage with, the aforementioned actors, will largely determine the choice of its strategy mix.

Research design and data sources

The research design follows the comparative case study approach (Mahoney, 2004; Przeworski and Teune, 1970) and the case selection is theoretically motivated on the basis of similar cases with different outcomes. The cases of Italian and Greek telecommunications industries are selected because they share a similar institutional context, which is close to the ideal-type of the Southern European employment regime (Holman, 2013). Both sectors shared the traditions of state-owned monopoly telecom operators, with strong unionization (Negrelli, 1996; Zambarloukou, 2010). The product market context is also similar, as the EU liberalization process equally affected both cases. The opening up of the markets resulted in increased competition, a prolonged period of restructuring for the incumbent operators, and a growth of contingent labour especially in call-centres. Yet the trade union responses to these

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challenges differed sharply. The overall timeframe of the case studies refers to the period between 2005 and 2010. The case studies trace the trade unions’ strategies towards call centre workers.

The data for the case studies come from archival and documentary sources, namely reports from the European Industrial Relations Observatory (EIRO), articles from Greek and Italian newspapers and sectoral magazines, and press releases from trade unions. More specifically, the larger research project on which this article is based consulted a total of: 19 Reports from the European Industrial Relations Observatory; 8 articles from Italian newspapers (*La Stampa*, *La Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera*); 16 articles from Greek newspapers and magazines (*Ethnos*, *Kathimerini*, *To Vima*, *Eleftherotypia*, *Weekly Telecom*, *Aristera!*, *Technikoi Dromoi*); and 6 trade union press-releases and announcements. The data were analysed following a thematic content analysis approach by continuous reading and re-reading them to construct emerging themes and identify paths, processes and patterns. The data were triangulated with a combination of documentary sources to enhance validity and credibility. EIRO database was chosen as the most representative and authoritative source for industrial relations’ developments in Europe. Any political biases arising from newspapers’ political orientation were overcome by consulting newspapers across the political spectrum from left to right. Finally, this archival research was supplemented by face-to-face semi-structured interviews with Italian and Greek trade unionists. More specifically, supplementary interviews were held with four trade union officials coming from two major Italian unions (CGIL, CISL), and three trade unionists coming from Greek trade unions (OME-OTE, Wind, SMT). The average

length of interviews was 1.5hrs. Field visits took place in Rome (May and November 2010) and in Athens (April-May and August 2011).

Trade unions strategies towards restructuring and contingent workers in Italy and Greece

Representing the outsiders: Italian unions and the Almoviva call centres

The liberalization of the sector and the privatization of Telecom Italia transformed the landscape in the Italian telecommunications sector. The intensification of competitive pressures was steered by new entrants such as Vodafone, Wind and BT Italia. The Italian trade unions managed to avoid a 'race to bottom' in wages and working conditions for core telecoms employees by negotiating a sectoral agreement in 2002 and then a second one in 2005 that set minimum standards across the sector.

The signing of the 2005 national industry agreement provided a regulatory anchor for the sector (Anonymous). For as long as call centres remained 'in-house', the national contract would ensure homogeneous employment standards for call-centre employees. However, call-centre services became increasingly important for customer care and sales. New specialised companies emerged in the sector, offering 'customer relations management' (CRM) services. The main telecoms operators began outsourcing the relevant business functions to those firms (prominently Almoviva), which in turn operated outside the limits set by the national agreement (Santi, 2007). In its effort to keep labour costs as low as possible, the Almoviva Group relied extensively on 'freelance' work contracts for call-centre operators. Almoviva had an incentive to resort to an extensive use of freelance contracts, because it avoided several costs that

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would have to be paid for a regular open-ended contract. This includes sickness and accident benefits; maternity leave; paid holidays; yearly bonus, etc. For instance, about 70 per cent of the call-centre workers were women (Santi, 2007), so maternity leave would potentially represent a serious cost for the company.

The outsourcing to Almoviva Group captured the attention of the three larger Italian telecoms unions: SLC-CGIL, FISTEL-CISL and UILCOM-UIL. Notably, it opened up the opportunity for firms to circumvent the regulations imposed by the national agreement. Indeed, Telecom Italia, TIM and WIND had fully outsourced their call-centres to Almoviva by 2005. This was a clear instance of ‘free-riding’; while the telecoms firms took advantage of the social peace benefits of the national agreement, they avoided the application of minimum standards to call-centre employees.

The strategic response of the Italian trade unions to this challenge was to forge a coalition with the state, and thereby, use the latter’s coercive power to exert pressure on employers. The unions used their political influence and liaised with successive Ministers of Labour to regulate call-centre employment conditions. Importantly, the unions began drafting the relevant regulations with Roberto Maroni, the Minister of the outgoing centre-Right Berlusconi government (Corriere della Sera, 2006b). The advent of a new centre-left government under Romano Prodi in [date] did not disrupt the process of regularisation. In June 2006 the Government Circular No. 17/2006 was finalised under the newly appointed Minister of Labour, Cesare Damiano (Galletto, 2006), and stipulated that it was illegal to renew freelance contracts for workers supplying online customer care and assistance (‘inbound operators’). The rationale behind this decision was that in this type of job there was ‘ample scope to determine

beforehand the content, intensity and form of the work undertaken' (Galetto, 2006). According to the Circular, the call-centre companies were allowed to use freelance contracts only for operators hired for very short-term promotional and marketing campaigns.

The trade unions also used the Labour Inspectorate's investigations strategically to put extra pressure to employers (Corriere della Sera, 2006a). Although Almoviva initially resisted the implementation of the Circular and threatened with dismissals (Galetto, 2006), it was unable to withstand the pressure exerted by the Labour Inspectorate and eventually reached a deal with the trade unions in December 2006. The company agreed to convert the freelance contracts of 6,500 employees into open-ended contracts, thus regularising the contracts of 97 per cent of its employees (Santi, 2007). Moreover, it was agreed that Almoviva would join the sectoral employer association, ASSTEL (Associazione delle Imprese Esercenti Servizi di Telecomunicazioni). This way, the provisions in the telecommunications national agreement were extended to also cover call-centre workers.

Why did the Ministers take the side of the unions on this issue? The short answer is that the unions were strategic in using their political clout with both centre-left and centre-right governments to achieve their objectives. However, this strategy did not reflect any permanent organic relationship with any party or other political cleavages. The unions could invite either party to support them, because their links went both ways (Interview with CISL trade unionist, 25 May 2010).

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The agreement reflected the general strategy of the Italian trade unions to support government reforms as long as they could regulate the extent of flexibilisation. This was congruent with the government’s preferences for flexibility. The Minister of Labour, Cesare Damiano, was in the past a leading trade unionist at CGIL and was in favour of ‘good flexibility’ (Corriere della Sera, 2006a). After the conclusion of the agreement the Minister stated that it was a ‘win-win’ outcome, and encouraged both sides to ‘look forward and to ensure homogeneous employment conditions and labour cost stability in all call centre companies, guaranteeing thus equal rights for the workers and fair competition among the companies’ (Santi, 2007).

The increase in atypical contracts was an instance of an abuse of the provisions of Law No. 30/2003 (known as Legge Biagi), which allowed greater flexibility in the labour market. While the unions supported those labour market reforms, the extensive use of ‘freelance work’ contracts resulted in excessive precariousness. Thus, it went against the unions’ strategy for ‘negotiated flexibility’. The Almagroup was notorious for abusing the system even when performing outsourced tasks for government services (such as the Italian Office for National Statistics, ISTAT). Thus, the government had an additional reason to put pressure on employers to comply with the appropriate implementation of the law.

Negotiating the industry’s restructuring: Vodafone and Telecom Italia

The Italian unions’ inclusive strategy is not only evident in the regularization of the call-centre workers’ contracts, but also in their approach to the industry’s restructuring. They used their political links with the government to put pressure to

private sector firms to ensure that the restructuring in the sector was the outcome of negotiated solutions.

In September 2007 the Vodafone Group announced a business branch transfer to the specialised transaction processing services company Comdata. This transfer would affect about 900 Vodafone employees dispersed across various company locations (Tajani, 2008). The trade unions recognised immediately the risks for circumventing the rules set out in the national wage agreement. The ‘transfer of employees’ was yet another form of outsourcing, and Comdata was not a member of ASSTEL, therefore it would not be obliged to abide by its rules and regulations. The unions’ response was to hinge on the state’s coercive power to influence the restructuring mode. They invited the Minister of Economic Development to informally mediate the negotiations with the two firms. Indeed, the Minister responded to this call and mediated the agreement between Vodafone, Comdata, and the sectoral trade unions at the premises of the Ministry (Tajani, 2008). According to the company agreement’s provisions, Comdata was required to apply to the transferred workers the national contract for the telecommunications sector, while the company agreement regulated performance-related pay and other matters. Even more, the same provisions would also apply to any future recruits in the transferred branch, to avoid a double contractual regime. In the event that Comdata group went bankrupt, Vodafone was obliged to transfer those employees to a third party or re-hire them in the Vodafone Group (Tajani, 2008).

This pattern of negotiations is not only observed in Vodafone, but also in the incumbent telecoms operator that comprised most of the unions’ membership. Although Telecom Italia remained the largest telecommunications group in Italy, it

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had already gone through three successive hostile takeovers. Despite earlier efforts to restructure, the company was still burdened with more than €35 billion debt. In 2008 the management announced that redundancies were unavoidable. The unions sought to influence the pattern of restructuring, averting outright redundancies and they negotiated a relevant agreement in 2008. The agreement stipulated that 5,000 workers would be registered onto ‘mobility lists’. Mobility procedures (*mobilità*) was one of the innovative ‘social shock absorbers’ introduced since 1991, mainly for blue-collar manufacturing workers, with the aim to facilitate re-entry into work of redundant employees (Trentini, 1998). Workers ‘in mobility’ received supplementary benefit and were enrolled on a regional ‘mobility list’ (*lista di mobilità*), while firms that hired personnel from the list were entitled to tax concessions.

The restructuring process continued, and in January 2009, the Telecom Italia Group presented its 2009-2011 Strategic Plan specifying the need for further 4,000 redundancies (Rinolfi, 2009). The trade unions opposed this action and requested the intervention by the Minister of Labour of the centre-right Berlusconi government, Maurizio Sacconi. The Minister responded, agreeing to act as a mediator, and on 21 July 2009, a meeting took place at the Ministry, between Telecom Italia management, the Telecom Italia RSU (Rappresentanza Sindacale Unitaria), and sectoral associations (SLC, FISTEL and UILCOM). After intensive and long negotiations, the parties reached an agreement whereby the anticipated redundancies were replaced by 1,054 ‘solidarity contracts’. This meant that weekly working hours were reduced for full-time personnel, turning their full-time contracts into part-time contracts.

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3 Still, the market pressures for further downsizing of Telecom Italia were not fully
4 averted. In April 2010, Telecom Italia's revised Strategic Plan for 2011-12 announced
5 a total of 6,822 redundancies to be implemented by December 2012. In response to
6 this announcement the strategy that the trade unions followed was consistent; they
7 invited the Minister of Labour, Maurizio Sacconi and the Deputy Minister of
8 Telecommunications to intervene and mediate the conflict. Indeed, the Ministers met
9 with representatives from Telecom Italia management and the sectoral unions at the
10 Ministry of Economic Development on 14 July 2010 (Sanz, 2010). Following this
11 meeting, Telecom Italia suspended the dismissal notices that it had sent to 3,700
12 employees, and after a series of meetings, the parties reached an agreement on 4
13 August 2010. The main aspects of the agreement included mobility procedures for
14 3,900 employees, 'solidarity contracts' for 1,100 employees, and suspension of all
15 plans to outsource business functions such as information technology, human
16 resources, and customer operations, keeping them 'in-house' (Sanz, 2010). On the one
17 hand, those entitled to be registered in 'mobility lists' would be employees who were
18 up to 36 months before retirement. On the other hand, employees entitled to solidarity
19 contracts would be younger employees, and while their working time and pay was
20 reduced, they were expected to attend vocational training programmes so that they are
21 retrained. Following this arrangement, the CEO of Telecom Italia, Franco Bernabè,
22 declared that 'the agreement is perfectly in line with efficiency objectives foreseen in
23 the Strategic Plan and that, at the same time, it guarantees workers' protection from
24 job losses' (Sanz, 2010).
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To sum up, restructuring in the sector was the outcome of persistent negotiations, and the state regularly stepped in to facilitate the process. The unions relied on their strength of membership and forged a coalition with the state to increase coverage. They represented not only employees in the privatised incumbent operator, but also employees in the new entrants. The pattern of negotiations relaxed some of the protection for core employees (insiders) but increased the protection of peripheral employees (outsiders).

Excluding the outsiders: Greek unions and OTE call-centre employees

Unlike their Italian counterparts, the Greek telecoms union responded to the growth of contingent labour with a policy of exclusion. Following the opening up of the sector in 2001, the OME-OTE union (Federation of OTE Employees) amended its statute so that it is able to accept other organisations as members. However, this change proved to be more of a ‘window-dressing’ act. Its eligibility requirements remained strict, as it required an organization to have at least 500 members before it is accepted as an affiliate. This in practice excluded the new smaller unions in Vodafone and WIND (Interview with trade unionist, 27 April 2011). The only union organization that became an affiliate to OME-OTE was the one organizing employees in Cosmote, OTE’s mobile telephony subsidiary.

The Cosmote union was established in 2000 with the aim to control the staggering expansion of outsourcing. More often than not, some other subcontractor employed employees who worked at Cosmote. The Cosmote union managed to minimize the extent of outsourcing for Cosmote employees with a series of regulatory attempts. It

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3 started by agreeing on General Staff Regulations with Cosmote management in 2002,
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5 signed its first firm-level agreement in 2004 and subsequently renewed the
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7 agreements in 2006 and 2008. In this process, the Cosmote union benefited from its
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9 affiliation with OME-OTE.
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12 The above policy contradicts the strategy of OME-OTE towards OTE's call-centre
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14 employees. The call-centre employees in OTE were also organized in their own trade
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16 union, the Trade union of employees in OTE-Call centres. The new union sought to
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18 become affiliate member of OME-OTE, but OME-OTE followed a hard line strategy
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20 towards them, sticking to the statute's requirement that a trade union could be
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22 affiliated with OME-OTE as long as it had at least 500 members (Interview with trade
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24 unionist, 27 April 2011). The OME-OTE unionists appeared reluctant to represent
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26 employees without a permanent employment relationship. Since the call-centre
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28 workers were employed on non-standard employment contracts (e.g. 3-hour or 4-hour
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30 part-time temporary contracts), they were automatically excluded (Interview with
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32 trade unionist, 27 April 2011).
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38 The contrast with the strategy of Italian unionists is sharp. The Greek call-centre
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40 employees tried hard to become members of the OME-OTE union, but this effort was
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42 in vain. For instance, a group of call-centre unionists attended the OME-OTE
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44 Congress in 2009 and requested the floor to express their wish to become members of
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46 OME-OTE. The organisers were holding them up, denying them the floor repeatedly.
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48 The call-centre representatives interrupted a speaker to take the floor, bickering
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50 followed, and at the end the call centre unionists were literally ousted from the
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congress (Eleftherotypia, 2005). How can one explain this exclusion of call-centre employees, despite the acceptance of Cosmote union as an affiliate?

The answer dwells in the inter-organizational politics underpinned by ideological cleavages within the OME-OTE Federation creating ‘them -and- us’ attitudes. In the Cosmote union the dominant factions belonged to the socialist and centre-right political parties, corresponding to the factionalism in the OME-OTE federation. Since those unionists had a compatible political persuasion, they were considered as ‘one of us’ and were eventually accepted as affiliates. By sharp contrast, the unionists in the call-centres were more radical and leaning towards leftist parties. The prospect of accepting the call-centre union as an affiliate of OME-OTE could potentially upset the balance of power within OME-OTE factions. The effect would be even greater if OME-OTE was compelled to accept members from newly established unions in Wind, Vodafone, and Forthnet. Such a prospect would not only jeopardise the balance of power within OME-OTE, but might also result in socialist and centre-right unionists losing control of OME-OTE’s leadership. In a nutshell, neither the call-centre union, nor the unions in other telecoms operators were considered for OME-OTE as ‘one-of-us’ (Interview with trade unionist, 2 May 2011). Even more, trade unionists within OME-OTE ranks were attached on ‘holding an office’ and secured a range of perks and privileges stemming from their officio. If the federation expanded its membership, then the number of positions would be reduced and many old trade unionists would be left without ‘office’ (Interview with trade unionist, 27 April 2011).

Negotiating the internal restructuring: compensation for core employees

The policy of prioritizing the protection of insider core employees over the interests of peripheral employees is also evident in the actions of OME-OTE during the negotiation of the restructuring process. Throughout the 1990s generous severance packages facilitated the privatization of OTE. This culminated to the 2005 agreement, in which OME-OTE got an extremely generous voluntary exit scheme, in exchange for the abolition of the job-for-life tenure for future recruits. The deal between the unionists, OTE management, and the Minister of Economy paved the way for the subsequent takeover of OTE by Deutsche Telekom. But the agreement was heavily criticised by the opposition parties and by the peak labour confederation GSEE (Greek General Confederation of Labour). This episode created a rift between OME-OTE and the new unions in the sector, and highlights further the contrast with the Italian unions' inclusive strategy during restructuring. OME-OTE actions were geared towards protecting the interests of a small group of 'core employees' rather than representing and protecting larger constituencies.

The use of 'voluntary exit' schemes for those close to retirement age was not a new practice. Indeed, this was the primary method of restructuring and downsizing, negotiated already in a company agreement in 1996. The 1996 agreement set out the details of an annual voluntary exit scheme for those close to retirement age, providing incentives in the form of minor compensation for earlier exit. It further specified that for every ten exits, only one hiring would take place. This process facilitated the reduction of the total number of employees from 29,000 in 1996 to 16,000 in 2005 (To Vima, 2005). However, the cost of the 1996 scheme was miniscule compared to

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the one agreed in 2005. The voluntary exit deal of 2005 was estimated to cost €1.6 billion and would be financed by the state budget and company funds. Apart from abolishing job-for-life tenure for future recruits, its main effect would be to further downsize OTE, reducing the number of employees from 16,000 to 11,000 (Eleftherotypia, 2005).

The abolition of ‘job-for-life’ tenure for future recruits was critical in the process of privatization of OTE. That is why both the government and the management put immense pressure on the trade unions to accept the deal. Indicatively, in early March 2005 there was a tripartite meeting between the Minister of Economy, the CEO of OTE, and the OME-OTE president and general secretary. In this meeting, the Minister and the CEO put pressure to the unionists to accept the deal. A few days later the Minister appeared resolved to proceed with the plan, announcing his intention to impose the voluntary exit scheme by law, if the OME-OTE union did not agree. Additionally, the pressures from about 5,000 employees who would benefit from the scheme ‘were very strong, almost unbearable’ (To Vima, 2005). The beneficiaries were up to eight years before retirement with the majority of them being between 48 and 57 years’ old (Interview with trade unionist, 27 April 2011).

The union leaders finally gave in, and the agreement was eventually ratified by the May 2005 OME-OTE Congress. The congress consisted of 300 delegates who represented the employees in the company. The delegates were either part of the group of beneficiaries, or just didn’t care as long as their own job-tenure was safeguarded (Interview with Trade Unionist, 27 April 2011). As a result only a minority objected to the plan, and a 77 per cent majority approved the agreement.

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3 Still, the agreement provoked severe frictions between the GSEE and OME-OTE and,
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5 as a result, the president of OME-OTE, who negotiated and signed the agreement,
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7 was sacked right after the event (Kathimerini, 2005; Interview with trade unionist, 27
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9 April 2011).
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12 This deal increased the mistrust within workers in the sector and reinforced the
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14 pattern of 'us-and-them' attitudes. The use of taxpayers' money to fund an extremely
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16 generous compensation for only 5,000 early retiring employees aggravated the
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18 suspicion towards OME-OTE. At best, the unionists in OTE were considered as faint-
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20 hearted, managing to get unionism 'the easy way' with the aid of political parties'
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22 clientelistic practices and exchanging privileges in return for votes (Interview with
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24 trade unionist, 2 May 2011). The private sector employees and unionists considered
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26 the OME-OTE unionists as 'sold out' to the management, using unionism as a
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28 medium for political career and uninterested in representing the workers' interests
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30 (Interview with trade unionist, 2 May 2011).
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36 By contrast, the firm level unions in the new private telecommunications companies
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38 (Vodafone, WIND, Forthnet) developed in a much more hostile environment,
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40 compared to the conditions of the public sector. Although unionists in call-centres and
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42 other telecoms firms were leaning towards leftist ideologies, at the organizational
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44 level they remained autonomous, distanced from any political party. They sought to
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46 represent the workers' interests, rather than play the game of political clientelism.
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Discussion

Writing almost half a century ago, Flanders (1970: 15) famously argued that ‘trade unions have always had two faces, sword of justice and vested interest’. Although trade unions strive to advance a better and more equal employment relationship they can also become excluding organisations, for in their attempt to unite ‘one group of workers, unions might divide them from others’ (Gumbrell McCormick and Hyman, 2013: 79). This double-edged identity became more obvious when the trade unions began to face important challenges from their external environment, especially the changing demographics of the labour market and the rise of precarious employment. A pressing need to address these issues emerged and, as was previously discussed, the unions’ strategic responses ranged from exclusion to inclusion. How the unions will eventually respond to this ‘brave new world of work’ depends on a variety of factors, ranging from the institutional environment in which they find themselves, to the internal organisation politics and power struggles that may emerge in their attempt to reconcile efficiency versus democracy and solidarity (Gumbrell McCormick and Hyman, 2013). The different strategic responses of the Italian and Greek telecommunications unions to the restructuring of their sector and the advent of contingent employment demonstrate these points exactly.

Although operating in quite similar institutional and product market settings, the Greek OME-OTE trade union appeared to follow a ‘vested interest’ approach, protecting only the insiders and adopting a policy of exclusion towards precarious employees in the sector. By sharp contrast, the Italian unions resembled closer the face of a ‘sword of justice’, adopting an inclusive strategy embracing the ‘outsiders’

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3 in the sector by negotiating collective agreements to promote their interests. Despite
4 the obvious differences in the unions' 'core strategies' (Holst, 2008), in both cases the
5 motivation to engage with this particular behaviour had common roots: the protection
6 of the interests of the core workers and of the unions' respective power bases.
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8 Contrary to their Greek counterparts, however, the Italian unions decided to follow a
9 more inclusive approach to deal with the problem. What explains these variations
10 however? The reasons can be found in the different union identities, the internal
11 organisational politics, and the diverse power resources each union had at its disposal.
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16 Contrary to their Greek counterpart, the Italian unions involved in the restructuring
17 negotiations and the representation of contingent workers were industrial unions that
18 brought with them an industrial-oriented mentality. As Benassi and Dorigatti (2015)
19 have argued, industrial unions are more inclined to follow a policy of inclusion
20 towards atypical workers, as their main aim is the representation of a whole class of
21 workers belonging in the same industry. By doing so, they manage to protect their
22 existing clientele and to further advance their associational and organisational power
23 (Gumbrell McCormick and Hyman, 2013), by incorporating into their membership
24 atypical employees. The Italian unions were transformed into sectoral associations
25 during the early privatization phase of the Italian telecommunications industry. This
26 further allowed them to mature ideologically and organisationally and to be able to
27 speak with a coherent industrial voice when the challenge of restructuring and of the
28 undercutting of the collective agreement took place.
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51 OME-OTE on the other hand, despite its size and national coverage, was basically an
52 enterprise-based union and had not managed to develop an industrial identity.
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Notwithstanding its apparent effort to claim an industrial role by altering its statute, in reality this change was never materialised and OME-OTE remained an enterprise union representing employees solely in the OTE group (i.e. in OTE and Cosmote). The lack of an industrial identity and ideology may explain the union's attitude towards employees from other telecommunication companies, but does not account for its reluctance to represent OTE call centre employees. To better appreciate this, one needs to consider the internal organisational politics in OME-OTE.

As is typical with Greek trade unions (Kouzis, 2007; Kritsantonis, 1998), OME-OTE is also an amalgamation of various political factions that are usually structurally linked to the major political parties represented in parliament. These political linkages had been extensively used in the past, especially by public sector unions, to achieve concessions by playing out the government's electoral motives. However, in recent years, Greece has experienced the growth of a new form of grass-root trade unionism, of mainly leftist political orientation (Kretsos and Vogiatzoglou, 2015); such was the nature of the small trade union founded by OTE's call centre employees. As mentioned before, the 'old regime' in OME-OTE perceived this effort as a threat to the union's political equilibrium, and decided to sacrifice solidarity by adopting a 'them-and-us' attitude to preserve its traditional domain. In the Italian case, on the contrary, the three industry unions were able to speak with a single voice, because of their industrial logic, and their autonomy and distance from the political parties. The development and allocation of the unions' power resources was also heavily influenced by the relationship they had with the political establishment.

Although both countries are characterised by a corporatist model of employment relations, whereupon the trade unions are closely associated with political parties (Hyman, 2001), in the case of Italy the unions appear to have managed to disengage themselves from the political parties' direct influence. Since the early 1990s (after Tangentopoli) there was no clear alignment between the new political parties and the three confederal unions, CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro), CISL (Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori), and UIL (Unione Italiana del Lavoro). Even more, the unions' membership became more diversified, and union leaders enjoyed renewed legitimacy from the wider society, because they were not involved in the scandals. As a result their institutional role was upgraded. In essence, Italian unions constituted a quasi-political party, which neither left nor right governments could ignore. In our case, the three telecoms unions were able to leave political differences aside and to use their association and organisational power to press the state to mediate in the restructuring of the sector and to push for the regularisation of call-centre employees.

This was certainly not the case with OME-OTE. Although the union was also very strong in terms of union membership, it primarily utilised its privileged access to the corridors of power to achieve its aims. During the negotiations for the industry's restructuring, the union managed to reach an agreement by capitalising its links with the ruling government, and exploiting the latter's need to negotiate quickly and with minimum interruption OTE's privatization.

To recapitulate, the different union identities, internal organisational politics and the diverse power resources help us appreciate the strategic choices of the Greek and

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Italian telecommunications unions. The Greek OME-OTE did not manage to develop an industrial identity, but instead remained an enterprise union whose leadership was keenly interested in preserving the status quo by raising entrance barriers to those who could disturb the sensitive internal political equilibria. Following on the tradition of public sector unionism, it reacted to the challenge of privatization by playing out the government’s electoral motives to easily achieve concessions for the company’s core workers.

On the other hand, the Italian unions managed to develop an industrial identity from early on, and to internalise the logic of compromising with employers and the state. Since the 1990s, the Italian unionists were much more pragmatic when carving out their strategies and more willing to accept the government agendas for reform (for instance, on liberalisation, privatisation, and labour market flexibility). As far as liberalisation is concerned they sought to protect their members from a ‘race to the bottom’ in wages; or to ease out the social costs of adjustment to business restructuring with bi-partite welfare funds. With regard to labour market flexibility, they did not reject it *en bloc* but put limits on the extent and nature of flexibility. Finally, having decided not to depend on their political links to achieve their aims, they focused on the development of their associational and organizational power resources as a means to advance their interests. This explains their decision to represent contingent employees rather than merely the core workforce.

Conclusion

The article examined the strategies of the Italian and Greek telecommunication unions towards the restructuring of their sector and the growth of contingent labour in call centres. This line of inquiry is placed within the broader literature considering how trade unions may shape labour market segmentation in a comparative institutional perspective (Batt et al., 2009; Doellgast, Batt, et al., 2009). The main aim was to explain the divergent trade union responses to similar challenges in liberalised telecoms sectors. The comparative sectoral case studies that belong to the Southern European employment regime (Holman, 2013: 492), were also suitable to gauge the wider applicability of the insights offered by the existing literature. Although the trade unions in Italy pursued inclusive strategies embracing the call-centre workers and negotiating the restructuring of the industry, their counterparts in Greece followed a policy of exclusion leaving call-centre workers outside representation and negotiating only the incumbent operator's restructuring. The diverse trade union identities, power resources, and internal organizational politics, as well as the institutional resources of unions in the form of access to the state appear to explain the observed variation in outcomes.

The article contributed to the literature by suggesting that the different legacies in political unionism and how these play out in internal organizational politics are important for the cases at hand. Although this argument appears to explain the differences in the two case studies, one needs to be cautious with regard to its generalizability, and carefully problematize the 'universe of cases' (Ragin, 2004) to which this insight might be applicable. On the one hand, the reference to legacies of

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political unionism appears to be rather idiographic and context-specific to Southern European contexts such as France, Spain, Italy and Greece. In those countries the links between politics and unionism appear stronger. On the other hand, the concepts of union identities, union power, and internal organizational politics appear to have wider applicability to different institutional contexts. Thus, it may influence the inclusiveness of trade unions’ strategies towards the growth of contingent labour.

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