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**“COSTANTINA, YOU ARE NOT ALONE”:
JANITORS/CLEANERS’ UNIONISM IN
GREECE AND SOLIDARITY MOVEMENTS**

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1. INTRODUCTION

On the 22th of December 2008, in Petralona, an old working class neighborhood of the city of Athens, Bulgarian immigrant worker Costantina Kuneva, General Secretary of the Janitors Union (PEKOP-All Attica Union for Janitors and Home Service Personnel), was the victim of an attack using sulphuric acid while returning home from her workplace. She was seriously wounded, losing the use of one eye and of her vocal chords and she is still in a hospital intensive care unit. Almost three months after that scandalous attack, the Greek unions complained that the "*investigations to locate the perpetrators are effectively at point zero, in stark contrast to the dazzling speed of the authorities in cases against workers and strike action!*" Neither eye witness reports nor laboratory tests have been used in this case. The victim's statement has not yet been recorded, despite the fact that she can now communicate in writing.¹

"Costantina you are not alone" has been the core chant of an emerging solidarity movement to the female militant labour activist and migrant worker Costantina Kuneva that was attacked and is incapacitated. This paper locates the solidarity movement at the intersection of the women's, anti-racist and the precarious workers labour movement. This is one of the few times in recent Greek history of social movements we have the interconnection of the all three movements. The interconnection of gender, race/ethnicity and class along with the impunity of the transgressing employers and the complicity of the government are the main reasons that motivate activists bringing them together to the solidarity movement. Thus the solidarity movement to Kuneva incorporates struggles against all forms of oppression. This presentation through the example of the movement will aim to answer certain theoretical and practical questions that we think will be useful to all of us who theorize on or/and participate in social movements.

Following we cite some of these questions that we think are significant for this purpose

1. What is the larger socio-economic environment (national, European and global levels) from where the solidarity movement emerged? This question lies on the theoretical approach of "political opportunities structure"² which refers to the "consistent -but not necessarily formal, permanent or national- dimension of the political environment which either encourage people from collective action".
2. A) Which are the components of the solidarity movement, where they come from and what affiliations do they have? B) What is the role of "social movement industries", "social movement organizations (SMO)", and "social

¹ «Nobody was called to give evidence; not even a man that came out running from a nearby internet coffee house when he heard her screaming. Three youngsters who were in a nearby bar ran to help Constantina right after the attack and they took it upon themselves to give their identity data and evidence to the policemen who arrived with the police car but the latter did not want to record them because, as they said, the former were not eye-witnesses. Would the policemen do the same if the victim was policeman Diamantis?" said Costas Papadakis, advocate of Constantina Kuneva for the so discrete absence of the police. Policeman Diamantis was shot a few days before by a small armed struggle group called "Revolutionary Struggle" in "revenge" for the murder of Alexis Grigoropoulos: <http://www.lifo.gr/content/x6/1874>

² Tarrow, Sidney. (1994) *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action, and Politics*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, p.17.

movement entrepreneurs” in the process of mobilization?³ When speaking about “social movement industry” it is meant that there is a collection of all SMOs focused on a given field. By using the term “social movement entrepreneurs”⁴ we mean those persons or groups of persons who can engage in social movement activities such as frame bridging, extension, amplification, and transformation of the movement’s messages, actions and ideas.⁵

3. What strategies and tactics are selected by social movement organizations in order to achieve their goals? By making this point we would like to direct attention to subjective factors influencing outcomes of social movement actions, in an effort to account for differences in the capacities of SMOs to influence the course of events and the achievement of goals.⁶

With all these in mind we analyse the impact of external opportunities on the solidarity movement’s structure which in turn and together with the subjective factors influence the kind and level of mobilization.

2. THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

Since the day that e-mail messages were circulated through the internet disclosing the attack against Constantina Kuneva, a remarkable solidarity movement has been growing day by day throughout Greece demanding not only the prosecution of the perpetrators and the instigators but also the abolition of “precarious employment” altogether. On the 15th of March, the name “Konstantina Kuneva” appeared in 6,430 results of the Google Search Engine and in a remarkable 91,600 results when searched with Greek fonts («Κωνσταντίνα Κούνεβα»).⁷ These results are far higher than those appearing when someone searches for popular politicians names’ such as Alekos Alavanos and Alexis Tsipras who are leading figures of the radical left, and even more than 15-year old high school student Alexis Grigoropoulos who was shot dead by a special police guard on the night of the 6th of December 2008 igniting the “December Rebellion” of the Greek Youth, becoming thus a new rebel icon for tens or hundreds of thousands of youngsters in Greece and abroad. This is a manifestation that new social movements are emerging in Greece following a “cycle of protest” that began unfolding quite rapidly in the midst of a socio-economic and political crisis.⁸ A

³ See Zald Mayer, McCarthy John. (1997) *Social Movements in an Organizational Society: Collected Essays*, Transaction Publishers, as well as Garner Roberta Ash, and Zald Mayer (1985) “The Political Economy of Social Movement Sectors.” in Suttles Gerald and Zald Mayer. (eds) *The Challenge of Social Control: Citizenship and Institution Building in Modern Society: Essays in Honor of Morris Janowitz*, Norwood, NJ: Ablex pp. 119-45.

⁴ For the “social entrepreneur” tasks see: Snow, David. and Benford Robert. (1988) “Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization.” *International Social Movement Research*. No.1 pp. 197-217.

⁵ For a successful example of social movement entrepreneurs, who spent great amount of time and energy traveling across Canada, giving public addresses, conducting television and radio interviews, participating in teach-ins, seminars and conferences, in an effort to publicize the issue of Canadianization, see: Cormier Jeffrey J (2005) “The Canadianization Movement in Context”. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 30, pp. 125-150.

⁶ For a theoretical discussion of strategy and social movements, see Marshall Ganz (2003) “Another Look at Farmworker Mobilization” in Goodwin Jeff and Jaspers James (eds) *The Social Movements Reader. Cases and Concepts*. Malden, MA and Oxford UK: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 283-300.

⁷ In a different spelling of the name such as “Constantina Kuneva” the results amounted to 5,170.

⁸ On the theory of “cycles of protests”, see a) Tarrow, Sidney. (1998) *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, and b) Oliver Pamela

“cycle of protest” becomes stronger when the state responds to the claims of dissenting groups with a contradictory mixture of repression and partial or procedural concessions. In this case we see prima facie that the right-wing New Democracy government reacted in a contradictory manner. On the one hand the Prime Minister as well as members of the cabinet expressed their condolences to the parents of the victim and on the other hand tried to suppress the riots that broke up in Athens as a spontaneous response to the police brutality and the government’s contradictory politics. Tear-gas, flash grenades, and police batons were used against both angry and peaceful marchers and demonstrators for weeks without mercy provoking proportional violence by black bloc anarchists who used tactics such as vandalism, rioting and street fighting. Downtown Athens and the centres of major cities became battle sites and many cars, commercial shops and banks were set on fire.

Who were all these people who marched in the streets for long hours and collided with riot police forces all these days from the 6th of December until mid January 2009? Why did they do that? What were their incentives? What results did that struggle have for both state and society? What would then follow? And where does the case of Constantina Kuneva fit in this context?

“Cycles of contest” do not fall from the social sky out of the blue. Although the murder of Alexis was the occasion for the riots, our duty as social scientist is to locate the incident within a wider context of social upheaval; we shouldn’t just to treat it as another event isolated in an on-going micro conflict between “thieves and cops”. Neither should we think of the case of Constantina Kuneva in terms of a Balkan-style vendetta between ethnic groups in the cleaning sector.

The economic crisis that has been striking the Western capitalist world more than one year now has provoked mayhem not only in the Anglo-Saxon neoliberal economies but even in societies that up until now were considered as steady and governed by social-democratic administrations. Neoliberalism is the defining political economic paradigm of the previous decades. A comparably small number of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profit.⁹ Associated initially with Reagan and Thatcher, for the past two decades neoliberalism has been the dominant global political economic trend adopted by political parties of the center and much of the traditional left as well as the right. These parties and the policies they enact represent the immediate interests of extremely wealthy investors and less than one thousand large corporations. Greek society experiences the consequences of the crisis in quite cruel ways as every day dozens or hundreds employees are laid-off or forced to concede to the employers their rights to full-time employment accepting part-time jobs. A characteristic of the situation is that during December 2008 there was a 17% increase of layoffs and a 12,9% reduction of hirings while during 2008 there were 10,103 job losses (4,023 more than 2007). These data do not include job losses of self-employed people who are not entitled to unemployment allowance and are not recorded in the lists of the

and Myers Daniel. (1997) *Diffusion Models of Cycles of Protest as a Theory of Social Movements*. Paper presented at the National Science Foundation. <http://www.nd.edu/~dmyers/cbsm/vol3/olmy.pdf>
⁹ See Harvey David (2005) *A Brief History of Neo-liberalism*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Greek Manpower Organization (OAEΔ).¹⁰ Moreover, retail stores close down, industrial sector SMEs reduce or stop production and their workers are put in indefinite suspension. Consumer prices rise daily. Pensioners cannot live with dignity when their pensions are not adjusted properly. Farmers take the streets and block national highways demanding that their incomes are protected from the consequences of European agricultural policies and the invasion of multinational corporations in agriculture sectors. Public education is underfinanced and the government has been trying to privatize universities and to legalize private colleges or branches of foreign universities. The general public understands that the socio-economic framework has been set by bureaucrats and technocrats and the decisions for the implementation of neoliberal policies are taken at the EU level. Public utilities of main economic sector such as energy, telecommunications, airlines, postal services are being privatized and the economy runs unregulated in favor of the upper classes. People distrusted political parties that contributed to this situation either as governments or as oppositions as well as trade unions that are considered bureaucratic, slow-moving, dominated by political parties, compromising with the government and the employers, and promoting only the narrowly defined entrenched rights and interests of the privileged upper strata of the working classes, despite the fact that trade unions are trusted more than the political parties.¹¹ Last but not least, a sustained ecological and urban crisis provokes many low profile manifestations scattered around Athens (eg protest against High Voltage Centers, new beltways around Athens, fires that have destroyed the greatest part of forest kinds in Attica and Peloponnesus etc.) All these combined with a strengthening of the repressive apparatus of the state¹² and the dominance of private TV as the main ideological apparatus well as with the prevailing climate of corruption on top levels of political, corporate and religious/ecclesiastical powers. It is this social context that Greek-style neoliberalism has gradually created and one could characterize it as “an economic, political, and cultural system that requires a certain level of political docility, social cynicism, and economic fatalism on behalf of its constituencies to maintain its hegemony.”¹³ After years of defeats of trade unions struggles against privatizations and of austere economic policies, the battleground for a social explosion had been prepared.

It is not easy to evaluate the results of the “December Rebellion” in a so short time from the events. We could, though, number a few consequences that can be assessed by taking under consideration some social signs. First of all, there was a proliferation

¹⁰ Kopsini Christina (2009) “Impressive Increase of Layoffs by 17% and reduction of hirings recorded by Greek Manpower Organization in December” newspaper *Kathimerini*, 17 March 2009
http://news.kathimerini.gr/4dcgi/_w_articles_economy_2_17/03/2009_307775

¹¹ For the crisis of social and political representation, see Mavris, Yannis (2008) *Have representative institution collapsed in Greece? (Έχουν καταρρεύσει οι αντιπροσωπευτικοί θεσμοί στην Ελλάδα;)* <http://www.publicissue.gr/1032/institutions-analysis/> For trade unions acceptance, see Tsakiris, (Athanasios) Thanassis (2005) “Trade Unions and Labor Relations: From ‘crisis’ to de-unionization” («Συνδικάτα και εργασιακές σχέσεις. Από την "κρίση" στην αποσυνδικαλιστικοποίηση.) in Vernardakis Ch. (ed.) *Public Opinion in Greece 2004: Elections-Parties, Social Representations, Space and Society (Κοινή Γνώμη στην Ελλάδα 2004: Εκλογές - Κόμματα, Κοινωνικές Εκπροσωπήσεις, Χώρος και Κοινωνία)*. Athens, GR: Savalas Editions.

¹² Althusser, Louis (1971), “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in Althusser, L. *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*. London: New Left Books, 1971, pp. 127-186

¹³ See Weiner, Eric (2003) “Neoliberal Ideology, State Curriculum Standards, and the Manufacturing of Educational Needs: Notes on the Transformation of State Power and Ideological State Apparatuses in the Age of Globalization.” *Educational Foundations*, Caddo Gap Press. Fall 2003. *HighBeam Research*. 22 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.highbeam.com>>.

of demonstrations, marches, occupation of universities and schools reminding another youth uprising 19 years ago against the policies for secondary education of the then neoliberal government of New Democracy led by a prominent political figure of the center-right, Mr. Constantinos Mitsotakis.¹⁴ This means that young people are something different than the image that had been projected during the previous years by the mass media in Greece; they were not regarded as apathetic and solitary individuals that were interested only to succeed as yuppies or to just surf the internet all day long. It was these that networked themselves, electronically and physically and took the initiatives to storm the police stations in protest for the murder of young Alexis. Then it is a fact that more working people took the streets this time by-passing the trade union bureaucracy which proceeded only in symbolic actions for arms' sake. These were mainly precarity workers, second generation immigrants who are denied citizenship, unemployed young people but also workers from problematic industries that were going bankrupt etc. More and more groups of young people were created for many kinds of purposes. Some of them rediscovered the left wing parties, especially of the radical left and others joined anarchist and autonomous political and social groups. In short, there is a new generation entering front stage in social movements. For one thing, there is an opening in the political opportunities structure as political parties of the elite, such as PASOK, decided to change gradually its strategy in order to polarize the political climate against the governing New Democracy and to demand that early elections be held because the party cadres felt that the people say "enough is enough". At the same time they have to gain back voters who in the public opinion polls had started to flirt electorally with the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) which for some months was flying high to 18% and PASOK was in a process of free dropping down to 23%.¹⁵ New Democracy struck by numerous scandals with the involvement of top government members and by the protests of its own members of parliament, followers and voters against its income and pension policies seemed that especially during the "rebellion" was at the brink of collapse. This was a typical form of an opening in the political opportunity structures that paved the road for new social movements to emerge and older ones to regenerate.

3. PRECARIETY WORK AND THE CLEANING SECTOR

Constantina Kuneva is a person whose character is defined by other multiple identities. She is a member of the working class; she is a woman and she is also an immigrant in Greece. Moreover, she is a historian, graduate of the University of Sofia. With such a social and cultural background, C. Kuneva had quite good qualifications for playing a leading role in trade union and community organizing activities and for handling complicated issues that arise in the private sector of the economy and, especially, in the cleaning services where it seems that violation of labor law is the rule. At this point we must note that as Constantina says in the sole interview she ever given in her life a few days before the attack, she attended a compulsory course on employment rights and that before coming to Greece she tried to find out more about Greek labour legislation and she realized that things would not be so easy since the various forms of protection they were used to in Bulgaria were not guaranteed in her new country. "According to labor relations expert and Panteion University professor

¹⁴ For the Mitsotakis era as prime minister see Clogg Richard (2002) *A Concise History of Greece*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp 200-217.

¹⁵ See *Public Issue* Barometer March 2008 http://www.publicissue.gr/wp-content/gallery/pi0811_7/image31.jpg

Yannis Kouzis: “there is a country-wide illegal flexibility network which flourishes in Greece starting from the 20% of not insured labor and ends to the extensive violation of every labor law provision concerning the legally working people. For example, the study conducted in the cleaning sector presents shocking accounts of the types of violations, of their careful planning, as well as of the methods with which any sign of human dignity is dishonored.”¹⁶ The attack with its archaic and sexist characteristics takes us back to a dark and noir world where the cruelty of “punishment” of the “guilty” person is based on an “unwritten law” which imposes, using exterminating violence, the annihilation of the “undisciplined” woman’s face, voice and personality, in a Durkheimian sense.¹⁷ According to the “ANTIGONE – Information & Documentation Centre on Racism, Ecology, Peace and Non Violence” this act of atrocious violence “condenses semiologically in an extreme version all the dimensions of unending employer terrorism against women immigrants who assert rights, especially in vulnerable sectors, such as cleaning floor-spaces or home work, where immunity and exploitation against them is the rule”.¹⁸

Outsourcing cleaning services has become the norm for public sector’s companies and these companies do not hire cleaners any more. Contractors are now the employers of thousands janitors, mainly women immigrants, who clean hundreds of public utilities, hospitals, railroad stations, schools, universities and other public buildings.¹⁹

The fact that Konstantina is a historian allows us to discuss the historicity of the cleaning sector’s job identity and its union movement. Although cleaning sector is one that displays extreme volatility regarding entry and exit of workers in and of out the sector, we may find tracks in the past. Regarding the character of cleaning sector jobs, these were precarious and it was regarded to be normal and natural for a woman to be a janitor or home service worker. Historian Evi Avdela notes that until the midwar period women were destined by the prevailing patriarchic ideology to be the home workers servicing men who were destined to be the bread winners of the family. During the midwar years home service working exits the household borders entering the public space becoming a profession, that of janitor/cleaner. The women that worked as janitors were mostly married women or widows, uneducated and of very poor working class origins.²⁰ This development is a result of the expansion of the

¹⁶ See interview by Yannis Kouzis “Employer-driven terrorism is not a marginal phenomenon” (“Τα φαινόμενα εργοδοτικής τρομοκρατίας δεν είναι περιθωριακά”), *Epohi*, No.945, 18/1/2009

¹⁷ Mechanical solidarity principled societies according to Emile Durkheim punished any deviant behavior in order to satisfy the so-called collective consciousness which was insulted by the “deviant”. Usually, death or damage of the deviant’s personality was the punishment of deviants in those archaic societies. See Durkheim Emile (1933) *The Division of Labor*. New York, NY: Macmillan. See also Thompson K. (2002) *Emile Durkheim*. London: Routledge.

¹⁸ Press Release “On the occasion of the world day against racism” www.antigone.gr/newsblog/?p=885

¹⁹ For information on working conditions in the Greek cleaning sector, see Kouzis Yiannis, Stamati Anda, Kapsalis Apostolos, Lampousaki Sophia et al (2009) *Labor Relations in the Cleaning Sector (Οι εργασιακές σχέσεις στον κλάδο του καθαρισμού)*. Athens: Labor Institute of the Genreal Confederation of Greek Workers (INE/GSEE)

<http://www.inegsee.gr/Απασχόληση%20στον%20κλάδο%20καθαρισμού-τελικό.pdf> and for the new labor relations models and practices in Greece see Kouzis Y. (2001), *Εργασιακές σχέσεις και Ευρωπαϊκή ενοποίηση (Labour relations and European integration)*, INE/GSEE-ADEDY, Athens.

²⁰ Efi Abdela teaches at the University of Crete and is mainly a feminist and labour historian. See Avdela, Efi (2009) “The late discovery of precarious labor” («Η όψιμη ανακάλυψη της επισφαλούς

tertiary sector of the economy which in Greece was traditionally large.²¹ Feminists in Greece at that time were mostly middle and upper class women, many of whom were teachers and public employees. They demanded that all women cleaners in the public sector be granted public employee status.²² Nevertheless, it was only in 1943 one year before the liberation of Greece from the Nazi occupation of the country in WW II, that the public sector cleaners were granted that right which was taken away from them on 1953 because “not only they fail to execute their tasks in a good manner, but also they are often absent from their service under various quasi-legal excuses”. That was part of the preamble of the recommendatory report of the law for the repeal of their public employee status. In 1946 there was a janitors’ union that participated in the 8th Congress of the General Federation of Greek Workers (ΓΣΕΕ) when for the first and only time the left-wing unionists won the majority of the votes and took over the administration of the Confederation.²³ However, for the absolute majority of trade unions and trade unionists who were mainly men, women cleaners and their collective organization were “invisible”. The weakness of their unions and the men’s lack of concern lead to an unappreciated defeat; in 1953 the right-wing government abolished the public worker status of cleaners and there was no resistance at all. It was only after the regime change in July 1974 and the fall of the dictatorship that some trade unions tried to organize women cleaners. For example unions in the banking industry enrolled them as members and in some cases they were self-organized in separate groups or unions. Moreover, the Greek Federation of Bank Employees (OTOE) acknowledged that cleaners should have a special standard payroll scale and this was officially recognized when they were included in the Single Payroll Collective Agreement in the banking industry (1982).²⁴

The other large segment of the cleaning sector includes home service workers (oikakes voithoi). In Greece home servants existed since the national liberation (1821) serving in the homes of rich and good standing families. At those times they were called “psychocores” (“adopted daughters”) and were regarded as “invisible” members of the household. In the majority of cases their status, work, and, in some cases, their lives laid in the hands of their employers. Labor law did not make any mention of them; thus they were altogether “invisible”. Many times employers treated them as

εργασίας»), Newspaper *Avgi*, Sunday, 22 March 2009

<http://www.avgi.gr/NavigateActiongo.action?articleID=443891>

²¹ For the size of the tertiary sector of the economy, the size of the state and its consequences for the Greek economy, society and politics, see Tsoukalas Constantinos (1987) *State, Society, and Labour in Postwar Greece (Κράτος, κοινωνία, εργασία στη μεταπολεμική Ελλάδα)*, Athens, GR: Themelio Editions.

²² According to Efi Avdela, women cleaners in the public sector were employed under very precarious conditions and with many forms of labor relations. For more details, see Avdela E. (1995) *Public Employees of Female Gender (Δημόσιοι υπάλληλοι γένους θηλυκού)*. Athens: Foundation for Research and Education and Commercial Bank of Greece.

²³ For a historical account of Greek trade unionism during the civil war, see Tsakiris Athanasios.(2009) *Trade unionism during the Greek civil war (Ο συνδικαλισμός στον ελληνικό εμφύλιο πόλεμο)* in http://tsakthan.blogspot.com/2009/03/blog-post_1523.html (in Greek)

²⁴ See Tsakiris Thanassis (2006) *Bank employees’ Trade Unionism in Greece: 1974-1993 [Ο συνδικαλισμός των εργαζομένων στις τράπεζες στην Ελλάδα (1974-1993)]*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, National and Capodistrian University of Athens, Department of Political Science and Public Administration.
<http://efessos.lib.uoa.gr/Applications/disserts.nsf/0/5142D27BA8CD35AFC2257295003A2558/%24File/document.pdf?OpenElement>

primitive women or, in the best cases, as their assets.²⁵ Their struggle for “visibility” was even harder than the struggle of women cleaners in public buildings and sites.

Such a historical record is not a firm base to support today’s struggles. Activism is above all a product of hope. Past struggles feed the new ones on the condition that younger generations recognize the strengths and weaknesses of older social movements in order to keep despair away from their ranks.

4. THE JANITORS UNION AND THE SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT

The contemporary era janitors’ union in Greece is PEKOP (All Attican Union for Janitors and Home Service Personnel). The union operates for almost a decade it has more than 1.600 members and covers those workers employed in the private cleaning sector’s enterprises. The majority of these workers (90%) are women and 65-70% out of them are foreigners coming from Albania, Bulgaria, Russia, Ukraine, and some of them come from Bangladesh and Palestine. Of course there are other local unions in other areas of the country, such as in the Prefecture of Magnesia, Achaia, Lamia etc, covering janitors who work in public schools in primary and secondary education.

The janitors have many problems to solve. First of all, they have to work 12-13 hours per day in order to put bread on the table. “Those who live on unemployment benefits are granted 300 euros an amount that we will work at least the whole shift in order to receive it” says Vlassia Papathanassi, who is the President of PEKOP.²⁶ According to the Vice-President, Vassiliki Tsiouni, “in our workplaces, normally there should be tables put up recording what hours we have worked and who worked, if there are nightshifts or weekend shifts, so each one of us could know how much money he/she is entitled to receive and to know in case he/she needs to accuse the employer for any violations, and to bring documented evidence showing that we have worked in that place. In many cases either they do not insure us at all or they insurance us with simple social insurance stamps and not with heavy and unhealthy occupations social security stamps that we are entitled to. There are also cases where the contractors force women workers, mainly foreigners who cannot speak Greek, to sign that they are paid the double amount of money they really get.”²⁷ 30% of the janitors are not insured. Those insured may work 25 or 27 days per month but the contractors insure them only for 12 or 15 days.²⁸

These problems are not solved since there is no good and liable Labour Inspectorate as the trade unionists complaint: “Inspections are phonies, just for public relations

²⁵ Prof. Pothiti Hatzaraki (University of the Aegean) speaking at the special event organized by the *Historiein* scientific historical journal (Athens, Higher School of Fine Arts, 16 March 2009) stressed that the psychocores emerged in public only when there was some crimes committed against them. Sulphoric acid was many times used in attacks against them by men employers or their thugs, or by jealous men against women and vice-versa after heart-breaking separations. and by pimps against whores in order to embarrass them for their whole life.

²⁶ See Interview with Vlassia Papathanassi and Vassiliki Tsiouni (Vice-president of PEKOP), “Women, Proletarians, and Immigrants”, newspaper *Kokkino*, No. 24, November 2007, http://www.kokkino.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=928&Itemid=40

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ According to Vlassia Papathanassi. See interview “Modern slaves of black unsecured labour”, newspaper *Eleftherotypia*. 12-01-2009, http://www.enet.gr/online/online_text/c=112,dt=12.01.2009,id=54684988

needs. Have all these time some inspections conducted leading the contractors to pay high fines? Not a single one. And when fines are imposed the contractors just don't pay them. They delay payments, they push them to the distance future and at the end they are deleted. As an employer told us a few years ago: "Don't run. You destroy your shoes. So what if I'm fined with 50,000? No big deal."

PEKOP tried to force the General Confederation of Greek Workers to mobilize its huge apparatus, in order not only to express its solidarity to Constantina Kouneva but also to start a nation-wide campaign for the rights of janitors and generally for all people working under these conditions of precarity. The Institute of Labor (INE), a "think tank" belonging to GSEE, conducted research on the issue and compiled a very interesting study on the working conditions in the cleaning sector. In the Introduction the authors of the study mention that they found out that "outsourcing is a flexible form of employing low-cost work force, which exhibits legal gaps that reinforce the conditions of work insecurity and social uncertainty. In parallel, another dimension emerges, that of illegal flexibility, a phenomenon which is especially growing in the Greek labor market and refers to the violation of labor and insurance law provisions, taking though eruptive dimensions in the cleaning sector" The Institute of Labor certifies information given above: Violations concerning payment of legal wages, working hours, social security issues, health and safety at work issues, trade union liberties, harmful changes in work terms and conditions, various forms of pressing, blackmailing, extorting and harassment are continuously central problems." INE also discovered that the employers use many "tricks" in order to violate workers' rights and to fool and misinform Labour Inspectors, although PEKOP president believes that Labour Inspectors inform the employers that a request has been filed to the Inspection Agency leading employers to prepare the ground so no violation to be found. Furthermore, INE stresses the more than ever heavy "violations that immigrant workers go through because they are more vulnerable and insecure in combination with their imperfect knowledge of the Greek language regarding the work terms that they are called to sign". Therefore, these workers constitute a third layer of workers below those of the public sector employees and private sector employee, the layer of precarity workers with immigrant origins. According to the study, the cleaning sector as said by the official statistics data employs 19,632 workers, whose job is cleaning internal spaces of all kinds of buildings, including offices, factories, shops, institutions, and other corporate and professional buildings as well as internal spaces of condominiums and cleaning of windows. The above number does not include the vast field of home workers. A study conducted by a private research company (ICAP) mentions that the cleaning sector employs more than 17,500 allocated in 93 enterprises.

The General Confederation of Greek Workers did not respond to the challenges facing the trade union movement the way it should. The left-wing trade union factions called the majority of the Administration Committee of the Confederation to proceed to either a work stoppage or to a one-day strike demanding the abolishment of precarity employment and the punishment of the perpetrators of the attack against Constantina Kuneva as well as of the accessories before the fact. Neither one of the two party factions of the majority, which is composed by PASKE and DAKE (PASOK and New Democracy respectively) bothered to even call for a demonstration. The study of the Institute of Labor was not publicly presented at a press conference as usually done in

similar cases. The political responsibility belongs to the majority factions that rule in the Institute and not to the researchers who brought out the study speaking at conferences and meetings organized by other first level unions, the solidarity organizations and committees.

The role that GSEE should have played was taken over by first level trade unions that grouped around PEKOP as well as around other precarity workers' unions, such as the Union of Employees of Publishing and Paper Milling Companies or Private Tutoring Institute Professors, etc. In the beginning a general assembly was called by unions interested in promoting the cause of solidarity to Kuneva and the abolition of precarity employment. The result was the formation of the Initiative of First Level Unions that coordinated all the activities of the unions that participated and organized many meetings, conferences, marches, demonstrations and occupations of public spaces such as the main offices of ISAP, the public utility company where the contractor cleaning company had placed Konstantina Kuneva and her mother to work. These unions were successful as many of them operate in a direct democracy basis without strict and heavy bureaucratic structures and they inspire their members to participate in the internal life of the unions.²⁹

The first group that was formed just a few days after the incident was the Feminist Initiative for Solidarity to Konstandina Kouneva. The first leaflet stressed that “It is certain that Konstandina Kouneva, being a migrant, was called to pay the price for her courage to emerge in the front and to demand the basic work rights for herself and her colleagues. The unprecedented manner of her ‘punishment’, with obvious archaic and sexist connotations, relegates to a dark world of inconceivable savagery, whose laws impose the literal ravaging of the face and stifling of the voice of a woman who dared to disobey. On this question, the responsibilities of the competent state institutions as well as those of the official trade unions are incalculable.”³⁰ This initiative played also the role of unofficial social workers organizing efforts to raise money for the financial support of the Kuneva family, to care for her son by sending its members visiting him on a rotation basis, as well as organizing concerts for supporting efforts for consciousness raising and participation as speakers in local events in order to bring out the gender dimension of the issue of precarity employment. As feminist journalist Angelica Psarra wrote, this attack “is a move of a clearly gendered nature (...) those who ordered and those executed the attempt against her adopted, not by accident, a method drawn for codes of violent compliance of the female body that we find in very different social contexts and with this sense the archaic connotation of the unconceivable practice perhaps foreshadows some new postmodern expressions of this practice”.³¹

Another social movement organization that played significant part mainly in consciousness raising work as well as in coordinating activities such as meetings at

²⁹ Tsakiris Thanassis (mimeo) “An interesting direct democracy experiment: Trade unionism in the publishing and paper milling sector” Paper presented at the 8th Conference of the Hellenic Political Science Association. *Democracy at a Crossroads: Threats and Challenges at the Dawn of the 21st Century*. Athens, Panteion University, 26-28 May 2008.

³⁰ See Soldatou Georgia(2009) “The doors of silence are opened: The gender dimension of work in the cleaning sector”, Newspaper *Epohi*, No. 954, 22 March 2009.

³¹ See Psarra Aggelica (2009) “For a significant job of female nature”. Newspaper *Avgi* 22 March 2009, <http://www.avgi.gr/NavigateActiongo.action?articleID=437740>

workplaces, neighborhood events and article writing for newspapers and magazines was the “Solidarity Committee for Konstandina Kouneva Against Precarity and Employers’ Terrorism”. This committee was formed in Athens on 17 of January. It was made up by activists coming from trades unions, social movements, civil rights immigrants and feminist groups. It took a “social forum” type of dialogue and organization. The committee coordinated the actions mentioned above and participated in actions decided by the other committees and unions. At the same time its members working in the framework of labor unions, municipality councils and student associations fought for persuading general assemblies and administrative boards to adopt resolutions calling for solidarity to Constantina Kuneva and confrontation of flexibility and employers terrorism. Moreover, meetings and demonstration are organized throughout the country by left and ecological political forces,³² members of which were also members of the committee, in order to sensitise broader public, raise money for the Kuneva family and organise relevant actions on the spot.³³ According to feminist activist Sissy Vovou whom we interviewed, among the SMOs that formed this Committee is the “World March of Women”.³⁴ The WMW aims at raise permanent workers trade unionists’ consciousness (or force them) to adopt a feminist stance and bring the issue of precarity employment front stage. In order to raise the issue publicly they organized a march on Saturday, 7 March, in downtown Athens where hundreds of women from women’s associations participated as well as men from left-wing organizations who are feminist-friendly unionists. They also try to convince traditional trade union leaderships in first level and second level unions, federations and labour centers to enrol precarity workers of contractor companies and agency workers, so that they are not punished by their employers in cases of strikes and to assert their rights. Due to the fact that this committee was formed with the participation of political party cadres and activists there were some signs of tension between the Committee and some members of PEKOP. There was an internal discussion in SYRIZA concerning a proposal to be made to Constantina Kuneva to join forces with the political party in the European Parliament Election to be held on June 7, 2009. The proposal was supposed to be kept secret until Kuneva was cured but it was published in the Press causing some trouble in the relationship with PEKOP.³⁵

The anarchist groups played significant part in the beginning of the mobilization for Kuneva in the sense that they were the vanguard groups that used direct action tactics and occupied the headquarters of ISAP public utility (Athens-Pireaus Electric Trains) as well as causing damage to ticket machines so that the users of the train service could travel free as a token of protest. They contributed to the formation of groups and local solidarity committees, such as the Initiative for Common Action against Contractors in the Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki that proceeded to

³² Members of the constituent political groups of SYRIZA (“Coalition of the Left of Movements and Ecology”, Communist Organization of Greece-KOE, International Labour Left-DEA, Democratic Social Movement-DIKKI, Renewing Communist Ecological Left-AKOA, Red Group, and Roza Group) as well as members of the now rising independent political ecology party called “Ecologists-Greens” and members of the Network for Political and Social Rights which is the oldest of social movement organizations in Greece.

³³ See Vovou Sissy (mimeo) “The ugliest face of neoliberal employers” *Transform*.
<http://www.transform-network.org/index.php?id=392&L=0>

³⁴ For the Greek branch of the organization and its activities, see their website www.poreiagynaikon.gr

³⁵ See Kechagia Voula (2009) “They disagree even for Kuneva” Newspaper *Ta Nea*, 18 february 2000, <http://www.tanea.gr/default.asp?pid=2&ct=1&artid=4502785>

occupations of administration buildings and offices and organized marches and clashes with the riot police. Some other groups of anarchists used violent methods, such as smashing the headquarters of the contracting company or burning train wagons, to get their message, causing trouble to the movement and giving an excuse to the right-wing government to press for tougher repression policies.

5. PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we tried to describe the socio-political context or the structure of political opportunities that facilitated the emerging of an existing but “hidden” social movement in the world of precarity employment. We established the connections between the widening gaps in the political system and its representative institutions and the growing dissatisfaction of the people and especially of the lower strata of the working classes (precarious workers, unemployed, and immigrants), the youth and women. These tensions are the result of the prolonged implementation of neoliberal policies dictated by the logic of capital and its profit-seeking culture. The Greek “rebellion” in December 2008 was a strong expression of the *voce populi*, though it was somehow violent at times. In this context it was easier than one could have thought to organize and mobilize immediately solidarity movements for victims of systemic attacks and for whole constituencies such as the world of the “precariat”.

We also tried to understand not only the objective external to the social movement conditions but to discover the strengths and the weaknesses of the solidarity movement and of its organizations, their strategies and tactics. We found out that there were different discourses as to who is to blame for the existence of precarious labor relations: right-wing government policies or neoliberal capitalism as a whole or the state as a single entity as anarchists say. A significant issue that differentiates various organizations is that of priority: working class centred strategy as in the unions’ coalition or strategy focusing on the female and immigrant identities as in the Committee’s discourse? These different views also cut across the lines of both sides of the argument

We also saw that pre-existing social movement organizations contribute to new organization building to accommodate the newcomers: young men and women without any prior experiences in movements, single-issue activists that do not organise themselves as political parties’ members, left-wing activists who nevertheless wish to participate in social movement organizations rather in party apparatuses (the so-called “*anendachtoi*” or “uncommitted” left-wingers), who usually the majority of demonstrators at peaceful marches. We also saw that partisan affiliations may cause problems in the growth of the solidarity movement when it is not clear if it is party preference or movement predisposition is the primary reason for someone to act (in the case of the European Elections issue).

Nevertheless, there seems to be a common thread that connects the two sides. Both favour radical mass demonstrations and occupations combined with conscious raising activities. These mobilizations have brought significant results. ISAP’s CEO promised to terminate the cleaning contract with OIKOMET (the contracting company where Constantina worked) after the mass demonstrations held at the end of February. The heads of GSEE spoke to the Prime Minister about the problems in the cleaning sector, despite the fact that nothing has been done yet. New ways of solving

were proposed, such as that of a self-managed company of women janitors who undertook the cleaning services job in the headquarters of University of the Aegean at the city of Mytilini.

So the final point for this first discussion of the issue that is part of our on-going research is that favourable political opportunity structure is a necessary but not adequate condition for a flourishing and successful social movement. It is a more complicated matter because it involves more factors and it is not a simple equation. And that should be our new question for further research since the object of our study is still “under construction” to the extent that we are only at the beginning of the struggle for abolishing these highly exploitative labor relations. .

APPENDIX 1

<http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article2723&lang=en>

An interview with Constantina Kuneva in the *Publications* of the International Trade Union

I've been living and working in Greece for seven and a half years now and have been in a union for just over six years. It was not easy and took me a year to find one. At first I wasn't planning to be an activist: it was simply that as a Bulgarian, where all workers are union members and the unions are a kind of administration and employment agency looking after workers, I was expecting that kind of support. I had worked in a chemical factory when I was young and been a union member. Then I went to university, where I got a degree in history of art and archaeology. So I didn't have a "trade union conscience" as it is called here in Greece, despite the fact that the Bulgarian school curriculum included a compulsory course on employment rights, so before working we knew something about unions and collective agreements, etc. Before emigrating I tried to find out more about labour legislation in Greece and I realised that the various forms of protection we enjoyed in Bulgaria, despite all the problems we faced there, were not guaranteed in Greece. In addition, as a foreigner, nothing was simple and I eventually contacted the Ministry of Labour, which put me in touch with a union covering my sector.

What did you do before getting a job in the cleaning sector?

To begin with I obtained a visa that was valid for a few months. My main aim was to get an operation for my son, who has serious heart problems, in good conditions, which I managed. Then in 2001, the government began a campaign of regularisation of undocumented people, which helped us. Firstly, I was employed in a supermarket and then I worked nights at a pharmacy. Since then I have been working for several years as an employee of OIKOMET, an industrial cleaning firm. I earn just over 600 Euros a month.

Why did you become a trade union delegate?

I joined the union in 2002 and was elected as a delegate in 2004. I have been re-elected twice since then. We defend the rights of over a thousand members, dozens of whom are not even legally registered. The most satisfying thing for me is to feel that I am helping colleagues who are suffering discrimination and being treated as "second-class citizens". In the last three or four years we have had some successes, though it has mainly been about forcing bosses to respect some basic rules in the labour legislation. In the Attica region (Athens, Piraeus and the surrounding area) alone there are some 100,000 people who need defending and organising, 40,000 or so in the industrial cleaning sector and about 60,000 domestic workers.

What are your working conditions like?

Dangerous and tough. We are in permanent contact with chemical products and carcinogens, but are not given suitable equipment and the workers have to buy protective gloves themselves or work with torn gloves. As you can see I have some skin problems on my face and so on. We do not get proper support from the

authorities. The labour inspectors are doing nothing to help us. The authorities support the employers, so we are on our own.

What barriers have you come up against in organising?

We have 1000 members, which is not many, but we are faced with a kind of terrorism by the employers. Whenever we hold elections there is an employers' representative who notes down everything, including the people entering and leaving the room, etc. I have work colleagues with whom I normally have friendly relations who no longer dare to speak to me, or say hello, in case we are spotted by someone from management. Workers have frequently been sacked in recent months for no reason, totally arbitrarily. Our employer is clearly at war with us after a few successful legal cases by our members.

What problems have you had personally owing to your union work?

For months I have been asking to change my working time but the manager has always refused. I have even referred the requests to the labour inspectorate and the industrial tribunal, but to no avail. I work 30 hours a week, from 5.30 to 11.30pm and cannot look after my sick child; he's at school when I'm at home and my mother looks after him although she is also ill. She also worked for OIKAMET, which is how I got my own job, but she was sacked just after my election as a union delegate.

As a union delegate I cannot be fired, except for serious misconduct, and that protection lasts more than one year after the mandate ends. But I have been accused of theft and have received death threats by phone. They say "don't move, there are lots of police around". One day, at the metro station where I was working, three police cars had come to question me, as though I had killed the Pope or something! Yes, they've been direct threats, not disguised. I also suspect them of trying to get me deported.

Interview by Jacky Delorme

APPENDIX 2

International Action in Solidarity to Constantina Kuneva

Human Rights Defenders | Urgent Appeals | migrations

v. Conform with the provisions of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 9, 1998, especially its Article 1, which states that "everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels", and Article 12.2, which provides that "the State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the present Declaration";

vi. More generally, ensure in all circumstances the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and with international and regional human rights instruments ratified by Greece.

Addresses:

Mr. Kostas Karamanlis, Prime Minister, Prime Minister's Office at the Hellenic Parliament, Greek Parliament Bldg,

Constitution Square, Athens, Greece. Fax: +30 210 3238129, Email: pressoffice@primeminister.gr

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Palli-Petralia, Minister for Employment and Social Protection of the Hellenic Republic, Stadiou str. 29, 10110 Athens,

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Mr. Giorgos Kaminis, Ombudsman for Human

Rights, Fax 30 210 7289643 H.E. Franciscos Verros, Ambassador, Permanent Mission of Greece to the United

Nations in Geneva, Rue du Léman 4, 1201 Geneva, Switzerland, Email:

missionofgreece@bluewin.ch , Fax: +41 22

732.21.50 Permanent Mission of Greece to the European Union, 25 rue Montoyer, 1000 Brussels, Belgium, Fax: +

32 2 512 79 12 / + 32 2 551 56 51. Email: mea.bruxelles@rp-greece.be

Please also write to the diplomatic mission or embassy of Greece in your respective country.

*** Geneva - Paris, January 29, 2009

Kindly inform us of any action undertaken quoting the code of this appeal in your reply.

The Observatory, a FIDH and OMCT venture, is dedicated to the protection of Human Rights Defenders and aims to

offer them concrete support in their time of need. The Observatory was the winner of the 1998 Human Rights Prize of the French Republic.

To contact the Observatory, call the emergency line: E-mail: Appeals@fidh-omct.org Tel and fax FIDH + 33 (0) 1 43

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