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The Covid-19 pandemic as a catalyst of art workers mobilisation and unionisation: the case of greek actors

La pandemia de Covid-19 como catalizador de la movilización y sindicalización de los trabajadores del arte: el caso de los actores griegos

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ABSTRACT

In Greece, as in other countries, the cultural sector is among the most affected by the coronavirus crisis, bringing to the surface structural problems that these sectors have been facing. As the first Greek state's first support measures were ill-adapted to cultural sectors' forms of employment, artists' unions mobilised and new solidarity groups and campaigns such as Support Art Workers (SAW) emerged. Based on findings deriving from qualitative research, the article examines the impact of the coronavirus crisis on the employment conditions and livelihood opportunities of actors/actresses in Greece; their mobilisations during the same period. Findings show that despite the constraints imposed through containment and social-distancing measures, the enforced inactivity and the exposure of vulnerability incited collective discussions and triggered collective processes, due to fewer time constraints, but mainly because of the actors' own awareness of the precariousness of their working conditions.

Keywords: Artists, actors, trade unions, mobilizations, Covid-19, Greece.

RESUMEN

En Grecia, al igual que en otros países, el sector cultural es uno de los más afectados por la crisis del coronavirus, lo que hace surgir los problemas estructurales a los que se enfrentan a estos sectores. Como las primeras medidas de apoyo del Estado griego no se adaptaban a las formas de empleo de los sectores culturales, los sindicatos de artistas se movilizaron y nuevos grupos y campañas de solidaridad surgieron, como Support Art Workers (SAW). Basándose en los resultados de una investigación cualitativa, el artículo examina: el impacto de la crisis del coronavirus en las condiciones de empleo y las oportunidades de subsistencia de los actores/actrices en Grecia; su movilización durante el mismo período. Los resultados revelan que, a pesar de las limitaciones impuestas por las medidas de contención y de distanciamiento social, la inactividad forzada y la exposición de la vulnerabilidad provocaron debates colectivos y desencadenaron procesos colectivos, debido a las menores limitaciones de tiempo, principalmente debido a la propia conciencia de los actores sobre la precariedad de sus condiciones de trabajo.

Palabras clave: Artistas, actores, sindicatos, movilizaciones, Covid-19, Grecia.

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INTRODUCTION

Generally, the cultural sector is considered as a fragile ecosystem mainly due to its structure, employment and working conditions, access to finance and remuneration models (IDEA Consult et al., 2021). Residing in numerous small and micro-businesses, public and non-profit organisations, and with its workers often employed as independent contractors and freelancers, cultural sectors are considered to be vulnerable (Betzler et al., 2020).

As Bastani et al. (2021, p. 1) point out: “In certain places, the novel circumstances caused by COVID-19 are a mere exacerbation of previous predicaments; they are a pile-up of crises and crashes under the capitalist market economy”. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only further exacerbated cultural workers precarious status but has also exposed the structural fragility of some producers in the sector and made the vulnerability of artists visible (Comunian & England, 2020; OECD, 2020). Additionally, public support schemes have proven, in many cases, ill-adapted to cultural sectors’ business models and forms of employment, and many artists have fallen “... through the cracks in terms of public support” (OECD, 2020, p. 10).

In Greece, as in other countries, the cultural sector is among the most affected by the coronavirus crisis, bringing to the surface structural problems that these sectors have been facing (i.e., extended undocumented employment, unregulated labour markets). The Greek state’s first support measures served to clarify how invisible art workers are to the state; while the inability of many of them to benefit from the subsequent cultural sector specific support measures provoked a major discontent. Their unions not only claimed immediate financial support, but also recognition and protection for their members as workers. Besides multiple union mobilisations, the pandemic crisis also generated new solidarity groups and campaigns (Tsioulakis, 2020) such as the Workers’ Initiative in Arts and Culture [Support Art Workers (SAW)].

The aim of this paper is to highlight the impact of the coronavirus crisis on the employment conditions and livelihood opportunities of actors/actresses in Greece. Furthermore, we will examine the question of their mobilisation and activation both within their union, the Hellenic Actors’ Union (HAU), and through the SAW initiative. Interest in this particular sub-sector lies in two fields: Firstly, the labour market of actors/actresses in Greece is highly unregulated, mainly due to the breakdown in the collective bargaining agreement (CBA) during the financial crisis and reveals low levels of unionisation (particularly among younger workers). Secondly, and despite the aforementioned facts, it is young actors/actresses who are behind the creation of the SAW initiative.

The main questions that this paper addresses are as follows. To what extent did the coronavirus crisis provoke new labour related problems and/or exhibited longstanding problems in the sector, and in what way did it impact on labour solidarity activities? In what ways did the SAW trigger labour solidarity both outside as well as inside the HAU? Which factors initiated the reactivation of actors/actresses within their union during the pandemic period?

In order to address these objectives and questions, the paper starts by presenting a brief review of literature on artists’ labour markets and unionisation. Then, we will analyse the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on artistic labour markets and the support measures for art workers, both in a comparative perspective and in Greece. The paper then describes the methodological approach adopted and continues with the presentation of the findings of our research in two sections: Firstly, we sketch the labour market of actors/actresses before and during the pandemic; secondly, we focus on their mobilisation and unionisation during the same periods. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the results of this research.

This paper aims to contribute to the on-going discussion and research concerning the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on artistic labour markets globally and most particularly in crisis-ridden countries of Southern Europe such as Greece, to demonstrate its role in revealing structural problems in these sectors and in triggering art workers mobilisation and activation, and to discuss the possibility of the Covid-19 pandemic as an unforeseen opportunity to advance the regulation of artists' labour markets.

ARTISTS, PRECARIOUS LIVELIHOODS, AND UNIONISM

The current sociological and cultural studies academic literature on artistic work is mainly dominated by Anglo-Saxon and French contributions that examine creative/cultural sectors more generally, or specific sub-sectors/ artistic professions.

Within this academic literature, the precarious livelihoods and working conditions of artists, often seen as a combination of 'pleasure and pain' are a widely acknowledged and examined phenomenon, as is shown, among others, by [McRobbie \(2004\)](#) for London's small-scale creative sector, or by [Umney & Kretsos \(2015\)](#) for young jazz musicians in London. Idealised representations of artistic labour focusing on free, autonomous and passionate labour often contradict the everyday working experiences of those who [Perrenoud & Bois \(2017\)](#) call 'ordinary artists'. This contradiction has been examined by various authors who conducted their research in creative/cultural sectors (and/or their sub-sectors) in the UK¹.

According to [Menger \(1999\)](#), a temporary employment structure and the search for flexibility are core features of artistic labour markets. Overall, people in the arts and culture sector are less likely to be in 'traditional' full-time employment, yet it is a full-time job that is simply atypical, as a trade unionist points out for actors ([Crosby, 2021](#)), and a 'portfolio career' profile (often out of necessity) becomes the common denominator ([Van Liemt, 2014](#)).

Furthermore, research has demonstrated that high levels of self-exploitation and acceptance of exploitation exist among artists. Thus, they seem to tolerate poor working conditions in a 'fatalistic way', are more 'willing' to accept unpaid work, low wages, underemployment and uncertain career prospects as part of their working lives. This attitude towards unpaid work and poor working conditions is obvious in various creative labour sub-sectors and national contexts ([Bellini et al., 2018](#); [Bellini & Lucciarini, 2019](#); [Butler & Stoyanova Russell, 2018](#); [Dean & Greene, 2017](#); [Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010](#); [Hesmondhalgh, 2010](#); [McRobbie, 2011](#); [Ross, 2008](#); [Siebert & Wilson, 2013](#); [Staunton, 2020](#)).

Certain authors refer to artists in terms of a 'creative precariat' ([Bain & McLean, 2013](#)) or 'creative projectariat'². To a certain extent, artists feature characteristics of Standing's notion of precariat, those who:

...have precarious jobs, without a sense of occupational identity or career in front of them, (they) have no social memory on which to draw, no shadow of the future hanging over their relationships, and have a limited and precarious range of rights ([Standing, 2012](#), p. 591).

In order to face the constraints of their labour market artists, it is necessary "... (to) learn to manage risky careers by resorting to the insurance devices that are at hand" ([Menger, 1999](#), p. 562). According to [Menger \(1999, 2014\)](#), artists may improve their economic situation in various ways: through the support provided by private sources (e.g. domestic partner's income, material support from family and friends, personal wealth),

1 Such as [Banks & Hesmondhalgh \(2009\)](#), [Butler & Stoyanova Russell \(2018\)](#) (focusing on stand-up comedians), [Sandoval \(2018\)](#) (with regard to members of worker co-operatives), [Serafini & Banks \(2020\)](#) (on visual artists), and others.

2 Meaning that "...their employment is contingent on recurrently obtaining funding in order to assemble sequences of time-limited projects, access to which may be highly competitive- as in a 'portfolio career'" ([Umney & Symon, 2019](#), p. 2).

or by public sources (subsidies, grants/sponsorship, social and unemployment insurance income³) as well as by multiple jobholding (in primary artistic activities, para-artistic and non-artistic subsistence activities). The risks associated with artistic professions - unpaid work, mediocre income, underemployment - usually imply the impossibility or difficulty in making a living from artistic work alone, rendering multiple jobholding almost mandatory (Menger, 2014)⁴. In their research concerning unpaid labour in the UK creative sector, Brook, O'Brien & Taylor (2020) demonstrated the deep inequalities and the uneven distribution of opportunities in artistic labour markets, where on the one hand you have the "big winners" and on the other hand you have

...a longer tail of those struggling with low wages and deeply insecure working conditions. [...] Who gets to 'win' in these markets is subject to specific social dynamics associated with long-standing demographic categories of class, ethnicity, and gender, alongside emerging research focuses in areas such as disability (Brook et al., 2020, p. 78).

O'Brien et al. (2016) also point out in their study on meritocracy in the UK creative sector, that despite the dominant perception that artists' labour markets are meritocratic and that everyone can make a career based on their talent, the class origin of artists plays a crucial role in shaping work trajectories, as well as the experiences and attitudes towards precarious and unpaid work.

In the light of the peculiarities of artistic labour markets, unionisation is not a given (Gill & Pratt, 2008). Like the difficulties regarding the unionisation of contingent workers, there are ideological and structural barriers to the unionisation of artists (Ertan et al., 2021; McRobbie, 2011; Percival & Lee, 2020). Specific features of artists' working conditions and mindset –individualisation, looking out for the self (McRobbie, 2002) – turn them into a 'nightmare' for union organising (Staunton, 2020), while getting them to see themselves as workers and what they do as work is a challenge for unions, as Simms & Dean (2015) point out in their work on actors in the UK. Predominant working arrangements complicate workplace organisation (Crosby, 2021), the absence of a recurrent and continuous relationship with specific employers hinders the emergence of stable communities (Umney, 2016), and the distinction between workers and employers is less clear than in other professional sectors due to multiple job-holding and high levels of self-employment (Kompatsiaris, 2015).

However, research has shown that despite obstacles, artists' unions have often functioned as guardians of vested interests and managed to mobilise their members i.e. by organising campaigns⁵. Additionally, artists have often successfully mobilised, sometimes in forms that differ from traditional union struggles, by projecting their status as precarious workers and embracing the term "creative precariat" (Ross, 2008)⁶.

Research on the actors' sector is limited and originates mainly from the UK and France. While some authors focus on the actors' labour market and profession (i.e., Menger (1997) and Paradeise (1998), the research of Cinque, Nyberg & Starkey (2020) who bring up the idea of 'a calling' among theatre actors, while Dean & Greene (2017) mention actors' attitudes towards poor conditions), others examine questions related to actors' unionism and mobilisations (i.e., Dean, 2012; Simms & Dean, 2015).

In the Greek context, the research examining employment relations and working conditions of artists (or of cultural/creative workers, in general) is extremely poor. Only

3 According to Menger (2014, p. 125): "...the welfare state's management of the risks associated with artistic professions can provide artists with an entire panoply of direct and indirect support, which, in some sectors, exceed market-determined levels of remuneration for creative activities."

4 See also the work of Lindström (2016) on visual artists in Sweden, Throsby & Zednik (2011) on Australian artists.

5 As in the case of the actors' and musicians' unions in the UK (Equity) (Dean, 2012; Greer, Samaluk & Umney, 2018; Simms & Dean, 2015) or Hollywood writers union (Writer's Guild of America) (Ertan et al., 2021).

6 As in the case of: freelance writers (Cohen, 2012), the artists' group W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) (De Peuter, 2014, 2020; De Peuter & Cohen, 2015), the intermittents du spectacle in France (Sinigaglia, 2007).

a small number of studies examine the relevant questions [i.e. in the case of musicians (during the crisis period) (Tsioulakis, 2020), visual artists (Baltzis & Tsiggilis, 2020), or actors (Karakioulafi, 2012, 2015, 2021)], while very few contributions concern artists' unions [i.e. the historical work of Potamianos & Delveroudi (2020), the research of Tsioulakis (2020) on musicians' unions]. Findings of these studies converge with data on artists' labour markets and professions. Nevertheless, the question of trade unionism remains, in large part, an 'uncharted territory'.

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON CULTURAL WORKERS

Up to this time, the outbreak of COVID-19 and its resultant containment measures have induced a chain reaction in the cultural and creative sectors, setting new challenges for actors in these sectors (IDEA Consult et al., 2021). Additionally: "...lockdown measures following the pandemic [...] have led to the prominent emergence in the public debate of the arts and entertainment sector, claiming its role as a productive industry and asking full recognition and protection to its members as workers." (Bataille et al., 2020a, p. 55).

One of the direct economic consequences was the loss of income opportunities, that was nevertheless unequal in all sectors. The venue/visitor-based sub-sectors, such as the performing arts, were most severely hit by the lockdown measures. The suspension of cultural activities, as well as the cancellation or postponement of events, shows and festivals produced a series of negative effects which were difficult to compensate, even when venues were able to reopen, and events could be organised, with often limited capacity. Organisations which re-opened during non-lockdown periods had to restructure their activities according to the new containment, safety and social-distancing measures. And all that in a context of continued uncertainty, since containment measures were and continue to be continually revised (IDEA Consult et al., 2021), while often public authorities were unable "...to provide these sectors with a temporal and strategic horizon for the complete resumption of their creative and broadcasting activities" (Barré & Dubuc, 2021, p. 2).

Covid-19 exposed the problems and the vulnerability of cultural workers as they:

... were confronted with a rapid collapse of jobs due to venue closure and social distancing rules, this coming after a long period of declining wages, increasing precarity, high indebtedness, and with complex employment patterns making 'catch all' social security support patchy (Banks & O'Connor, 2021, p. 4).

In addition, although artists are used to a 'bulimic' career paths (Gill, 2014) ("from feast to famine"), Covid-19 caused a much greater than the usual ups and downs disruption of their working career (Pulignano et al., 2021, p. 10).

Some subsectors, such as the performing arts, were temporarily shut down and have "...become frozen in a 'wait-and-see' attitude" (Pulignano et al., 2021, p. 10). Performing artists not only lost their immediate work, but they had little contractual protection for upcoming cancellations. Being mainly portfolio workers, they also lost the multiple income streams on which performing artists rely, such as performance occasions and parallel work (Tsioulakis & Fitzgibbon, 2020), and were forced to look for alternative sources of income, often in the margins or completely outside of their profession (Pulignano et al., 2021). Pulignano et al. (2021) and IDEA Consult et al. (2021) also point out some not immediately obvious impacts: the loss of predictability and control over their work and careers; the loss of business networking opportunities and therefore of income for artists (since live events, fairs and festivals offer important networking opportunities); damaged employability; and interrupted career paths.

The pandemic crisis has left many cultural workers dependent on state support. Even though the precarious nature of cultural work has been widely acknowledged in

academic literature, it has often been invisible in the eyes of policymaking and seems to become visible only in moments of crisis. At the same time since the 1990s, even though the economic impacts and the development potential of cultural sectors have been highlighted, little has been done in policy terms to protect workers in these sectors. Even during the period of the financial crisis, policymakers considered the problems faced by cultural workers as endemic to the existent system of production and preferred the option of its self-regulation (Comunian & Conor, 2017; Comunian & England, 2020). Very often, governments and public agencies failed to understand the nature of artists' work, or the gaps in existing support systems (Tsioulakis & Fitzgibbon, 2020).

Regarding relief measures, comparative studies have shown the differential approaches taken by national governments (Betzler et al., 2020). In some cases, a more targeted aid has been provided, while in others support measures have had a vaguer character that failed to consider the peculiarities of artists' work (Bataille et al., 2020a).

According to Pulignano et al. (2021), many solo self-employed/freelancers in the cultural sectors fell outside of the measures' scope because of their ambiguous legal status—somewhere in between businesspeople and subordinate workers—and the complexity and bureaucratic requirements of the administrative procedures for claiming support. Due to the multiplicity of atypical employment contracts that artists are hired on, numerous individuals fell through the cracks in the safety net and were abandoned with no support at all. Furthermore: "...in most cases, governments established very rigid and 'automatic' thresholds which did not fully account for the reality of freelance work". The respondents in their survey reported that: "...they were excluded from access to state support because of legal technicalities, because they had not worked long enough, or because their incomes were deemed to be too high, even if in lockdown this income collapsed to zero" (Pulignano et al., 2021, p. 17).

In other words, artists very often had difficulties in proving that they had been working, and consequently their eligibility for the status of artists and the succeeding social security allowances⁷. Furthermore, since agreements are often informal, and contracts are signed at the last minute in those cases where a project had been cancelled due to COVID-19 (and an employment contract had not yet been signed), cultural workers were unable to fall back on temporary unemployment or other compensations. This was also valid in the case of workers who had no proof of a contract's termination. Additionally, if artists had not worked regularly in the past, they were ineligible to apply for unemployment allowances, and would consequently end up empty-handed (EENCA, 2021; Pulignano et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, despite the previously cited difficulties of artists' unionisation and the restrictions related to lockdown and social-distancing measures, the relevant sectors also gave proof of union activity and spontaneous movements⁸ (IDEA Consult et al., 2021).

The case of Greece is not much different from that of other countries during the pandemic period, since the performing arts were also most severely hit by the lockdown and restriction measures. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Greek government has adopted measures to provide relief to those individuals and sectors that have been particularly affected, including the cultural sector. During the 1st lockdown in March, 2020, measures had a vaguer character, and artists could benefit from the same support as the self-employed or employees, such as: a one-off payment (800 € for 1½ months from mid-March to the end of April), payment of social security contributions for employees whose

7 For example, in Italy, the first set of emergency measures provoked unions' reactions that raised the issue of the significant numbers of workers not covered by those measures. In France, due to the conditions related to special unemployment insurance system for intermittent employees, demanding a minimum of 507 hours of work during one year in order to access unemployment benefits the following year, most of the 'intermittents du spectacle' not only lost the revenues they should have earned, but also risked not fulfilling the working hours needed to access unemployment benefits for the following year (EENCA, 2021). In Switzerland, as the unemployment welfare system for musicians is not based on the number of hours but of weeks of registered work, they are de facto excluded from the usual artists' unemployment benefit scheme, since most of them work as independent workers, rather than intermittent wage earners, and their work is much more fragmented than that of other stage artists (Bataille et al., 2020a).

8 Such as the case of the occupation of theatres in France in March, 2021.

labour contracts had been suspended, delayed taxes and social security contributions for workers and employers affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the unions' protests and criticism of the inadequacy of criteria to eligibility⁹ different sets of special measures were announced: seasonal cultural workers were included in the list of beneficiaries, the perimeter of beneficiaries was expanded, and the requirements further limited. In May, 2020, the Ministry of Culture also initiated a Registry¹⁰ to map the professionals of the cultural and creative sectors, operated by the Ministry of Labour. To define eligibility for the special support of 534€/month, artists had to register.

The announcement of most measures has caused great confusion and insecurity for large segments of the cultural sectors, since in many cases, it was unclear who its beneficiaries were. The eligibility criteria were not always clear, and totally disregarded the complex and precarious working conditions in the sectors. As to the Registry, the setting of strict deadlines for registration, the absence of various professions, even though some obsolete ones were included (e.g. wigmaker), and the impossibility of adding more than one specialisation per person¹¹ created major discontent. Also, very often cultural workers viewed the Registry with suspicion, despite the repeated calls of their unions to register. This must be comprehended in a context of general mistrust, discredit, and repeated appeals for the resignation of the leadership of the Ministry of Culture. The declaration of the Minister of Culture in September, 2020 that many cultural workers cannot be subsidised because "...artists largely move in the field of the 'black economy', artistic activity is not visible, they do not appear to be recorded anywhere"¹² provoked intense reactions, since responsibility was seen to be imputed on the workers, and the cultural sector had been unfairly portrayed as if it was the only one where undeclared work existed.

Unions (either separately or combined) responded in various ways mainly to make cultural workers visible to the state and to demonstrate the peculiarities of their working conditions through demonstrations, joint statements and actions, official letters to the authorities, etc. Furthermore, new collectivities emerged (such as the SAW), cultural workers began to participate more actively in their unions¹³ and processes for the creation of new unions were initiated¹⁴.

In the case of the performing arts, another controversial issue has been the wave of online streaming theatrical and musical performances. Most particularly, in the theatre sectors, HAU pointed out that online streaming unleashed a plethora of producers who took license with actors/performers either by side-stepping the legislative framework on related rights, or by providing insignificant compensation (for example, a day's wage for each online streaming performance). In its deliberations with private theatre organisations and producers, HAU requested the payment of a fixed amount to compensate for the recording and conversion of a live performance into a digital product, as well as a percentage to be paid to actors depending on the revenue from digital projections and the number of actors employed¹⁵.

9 <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/CulturalRights/Pages/Covid19.aspx>
https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/CulturalRights/COVID_add_Submissions/SupportArtWorkers.docx

10 artandcultureprofessionals.services.gov.gr

11 The numerous questions on SAW's Facebook page relating to the Registry (many could not find the relevant professional category), clearly reflect this confusion.

12 <https://www.in.gr/2020/09/23/culture/fal-so-tis-mendon-i-eksorgise-tous-kallitexnes/>

13 One example was participation in the elections of the HAU, by far the highest turnout in recent years.

14 This is the case of the initiative for the creation of a union for professionals working "under the stage" (dramatists, costume designers, directors, set designers, composers, lighting designers, choreographers, etc.).

15 An exception is the case of the National Theatre, where the union was able to secure the employees' related rights for online streaming performances under the new company-level collective agreement signed in March 2021.
<https://www.monopoli.gr/2021/01/25/istories/epikaira/448420/%CE%84osa-diekdi-kei-to-sei-gia-ta-live-streaming/>

THE RESEARCH

This paper draws from qualitative research based on (37) semi-structured interviews with actors and representatives of associations and collectivities [HAU, SAW, Panhellenic Federation of Spectacle Audience (POTHA),] from September to November, 2020.

Our interest in this particular sector derives from previous qualitative research on the employment/working conditions of actors/actresses in Greece conducted over the period just before the upsurge of the financial crisis. Two facts motivated us to conduct new research in the sector: Firstly, the publicly expressed claims of artists to become visible as workers; secondly, the strong involvement of young actors/actresses in the creation of the SAW initiative.

As to the profile of our interviewees, with the exception of the presidents of the HAU and the POTHA, who we interviewed in their institutional role, the age of the remaining interviewees (35) is as follows: 22 are between 20-30 years old, seven between 40-45, five are over 50 and one is under 30. Among them: 15 are women and the remaining 20 men; seven are members of the HAU board (four of them are also members of the SAW coordination committee). Most of our interviewees also hold a university degree in a subject not directly related to acting and/or theatre. The majority of our them (29 out of 35) work primarily on the stage, mainly due to a conscious decision not to perform in television. Among them, some play in film or commercials (seen as a way to gain some extra money in less demanding work). All are residents of Athens and mainly work in Athenian theatre stages¹⁶.

Interviewees were found through personal contacts and snowball sampling. In order to protect their anonymity, pseudonyms have been used throughout and references to particular times and places have been removed.

Due to containment measures related to Covid-19, only six interviews were conducted in person, while the rest were conducted online (via Skype, Zoom) and their minimum duration was one hour. Chronologically, the interviews concerned the financial crisis and the pandemic period, from the first lockdown in March, 2020 until November, 2020. Flashback to the years of the financial crisis was necessary in order to understand the working conditions of actors/actresses, pre-Covid.

Thematic analysis based on the interview guide and research questions was used to analyse the transcribed interviews. The interview guide, in addition to the biographical data, included the following themes: engagement in acting; work consciousness and professional identity; working conditions and employment during the financial crisis; impact of the pandemic on employment and livelihood opportunities; the HAU before and after the pandemic; assessment of the role of the SAW; labour activism and participation in the mobilisations (before and during the pandemic period); evaluation of pandemic-related support measures.

LABOUR RELATIONS IN THE ACTING PROFESSION BEFORE AND DURING THE PANDEMIC PERIOD

As in other countries, the acting profession in Greece is unmapped and marked by high percentages of undocumented employment and a multitude of employment models. Thus, it is difficult to determine the exact number of actors/actresses. According to data provided to us by the HAU, in 2017, 7,700 persons were registered in the EFKA (Unified

¹⁶ This is due to the concentration of many theatre stages in Athens, while in regional areas, private demand for work is more limited, or even residual. Indicatively, based on 2015 data, Greece had 377 theatre stages, both public and private, across the country, 287 of which were located in Attica, while the number of theatre productions staged in 2015 in Attica alone was 1,542 (Avdikos et al., 2017).

Social Security Fund) as actors/directors. Nevertheless, this number does not include all actors/actresses due to the high percentage of undocumented employment and multiple jobholding.

Even before the outbreak of the economic crisis, the labour market for actors was already extremely deregulated, precarious and marked by high unemployment rates (Karakioulafi, 2012, 2015). Unemployment also derives from the fact that, every year, more and more graduates of various theatrical education and training structures [state-recognised drama schools (state, private), workshops, acting seminars, etc.], as well as people coming from other professional fields, who nevertheless practice the profession of actor, are entering the actors' labour market en masse.

Similar to the case of Greek musicians studied by Tsioulakis (2020), for actors as well, the crisis was somehow both new and familiar since they "...experienced it as an intensifying of the precarity they had dealt with their whole lives"¹⁷.

Still, during the crisis, and following the breakdown of the CBA for actors working in private theatre, the problems worsened¹⁸. As a result, a two-tier labour market has been formed: On the one hand, there is a small number of actors employed at the National Theatre, the National Theatre of Southern Greece, and the Municipal Regional Theatre of Patras, who are covered by their respective company-level CBAs; on the other hand, most actors who are working in private theatres are not covered by any kind of CBA. The breakdown of the CBA in the private theatre sector resulted in: the introduction of individual agreements, daily, or at best three-month contracts; the generalisation of undeclared and unpaid work; the diminution of wages; the extension of payments per hour or per performance; the highly common situation of unpaid rehearsals; payment as a percentage of the performance's tickets, all this in combination with increasing unemployment within the profession (Karakioulafi, 2021).

The above, added to the fact that the theatrical scenes landscape is extremely fragmented and dominated by a multitude of very small private workplaces, has led to a widespread deregulation of the actors' labour market.

To cope with the extended employment precarity, multiple job holding has become almost inevitable for all our interviewees. Most of them described a working day that was extremely intensive in terms of work pace and fragmented in terms of activities and workplaces. Several were simultaneously engaged in theatre-related work (e.g., actor - director) or educational activities. There are also those engaged in breadwinning and generally precarious non-artistic work. Finally, some actors, although classified as professional, still pursued one other profession mostly related to their university degree (i.e., architects, engineers, lawyers, graphic designers). In addition, multiple job holding also concerned the simultaneous employment with various employers (children's theatre, evening shows, etc.)¹⁹.

Nevertheless, most of our interviewees benefitted from direct or indirect financial support from the family environment, mainly during periods of unemployment or of scarce income. In the Greek context, this sort of family support privileged protective mechanism against employment-related risks, and it is noteworthy that very few of our interviewees consider state support as being a crucial mechanism against their occupational risks, since most of them were unable to define eligibility for the unemployment allowance. Even those coming from working-class families seem to have benefitted from limited direct and indirect support.

¹⁷ <https://www.qub.ac.uk/Research/feature/greek-musicians-help-uk-performers-covid/>

¹⁸ The last CBA in the private theatre between the HAU and the Panhellenic Association of Private Theatres (PEETH) dates from 2011-2012. Due to the self-dissolution of the PEETH in March 2016, the HAU had no 'interlocutors' for the signing of a CBA.

¹⁹ Their quotes remind us of what Taylor & Littleton (2012) call the 'double live' of artists who are kind of 'juggling' to make ends meet and in order to manage their multiple commitments.

Certainly, this family support is not given to all, and largely depends on their families' personal wealth and available resources. As demonstrated in the research of [Friedman et al. \(2017\)](#) on British actors:

The ability to access, or call upon, familial wealth shaped the experience of these actors in myriad ways. First, it provided insulation from much of the precariousness of the labour market, particularly the need to seek alternative work to support oneself between acting roles ([Friedman et al., 2017](#), p. 1000).

Thus, in line with their research, even though our interviewees faced similar challenges, "...they did not do so on an equal footing", since the considerable resources of capital (economic, cultural and social) that some of them brought with them into the profession offered them tangible occupational assets: "These assets, highly stratified by class origin, fundamentally shape what courses of action are possible, and how individuals can respond to the contingencies of the profession" ([Friedman et al., 2017](#), p. 1000). Hence, those possessing these resources were able to cope more successfully with employment precarity and make professional choices that were closer to 'autonomous' artistic work. Thus, the relative disinterestedness – a characteristic of artists occupying a position close to Bourdieu's autonomous pole - that some of our interviewees proved towards economic profits implies, nevertheless, a certain economic logic. As [Bourdieu \(1983, p. 321\)](#) mentions: "There are economic conditions for the indifference to economy which induces a pursuit of the riskiest positions in the intellectual and artistic avant-garde, and also for the capacity to remain there over a long period without any economic compensation".

As an 'antidote' to the deterioration of working conditions and employment opportunities during the crisis period, many small non-profit theatre companies (AMKE) emerged, advancing collaborative art projects and co-creation, that received small grants from the Ministry of Culture. However, due to their small budget and their consequent inability to pay their workers decent wages, they also somehow contributed to reproducing the problem of unpaid or under-paid work. Thus, as [Borges & Veloso \(2020, p. 103\)](#) point out in their analysis of performing arts' organisations in Portugal in midst crisis, the case of AMKE also responds to "...the enduring need to adopt strategies to face up to the economic crisis, based on flexibility and insecurity.", where the latter are not options, but evidence of the realities artistic organisations faced in midst the financial crisis. Thus:

"The adoption of flexible organizational models could be interpreted either as the ability to challenge the neoliberal restructuring of work or, on the contrary, as an attachment to this paradigm. Both ways reflect individuals' difficulties in overcoming the vulnerability of their position in the labour market" ([Borges & Veloso, 2020](#), p. 85).

The first lockdown of March 2020 brought the aforementioned problems to the fore, although the impact is not homogeneous, and our sample includes various cases. At first, many actors were not able to benefit from the specific support measures, either because they could not prove that they had been working at the time (they were in rehearsals, had not yet signed contracts, etc.), or because they had not filled in the necessary conditions to access regular unemployment insurance benefits. That is the case of Anna, a 52-year-old actress, who in the meantime gives private lessons to children to make ends meet:

I did not even get one euro. Because I was not under contract that was going to end, and I did not comply with conditions to receive unemployment benefit.

A few artists, such as Maria, a 35-year-old actress could not benefit from the special support for artists. She had no official employment contract, but by pure chance, as she told us, she applied in February 2020 for the regular unemployment allowance, and thus managed to receive the relevant support for a few months.

Some of the actors/actresses in our sample, like Antonis, a 33-year-old actor/director, received support by means of their second job or occupational activity. Even though he

was working on various projects, he could not benefit from the special support for artists, however managed to receive one for ushers.

Certain interviewees, also directing an AMKE, managed to ensure support for their employees, but not for themselves. This was the case for Kostas, a 43-year-old actor who also manages an AMKE:

At the time of the lockdown, the company employed eight actors and three technicians. [...] These 11 people were all insured, and all received their salary. And so, everyone to this day (November) receives an allowance. But I am the exception because there were a lot of people and the budget was small, so I wasn't insured at that time, nor the year before, so I couldn't get an allowance.

Finally, there were those who were fortunate enough to have a 5-month contract with one of the National Theatres, that also had to annulate performances but did not suspend functioning during the lockdown. In that case, all contributors (including actors and actresses) continued to receive their salary.

Apart from the immediate economic losses, all our interviewees pointed out the indirect economic losses due to the cancellation or postponement of future job opportunities with employers with whom they had an oral agreement. Like Ioli, a 35-year-old actress who explained to us that just before the lockdown, she was employed with a contract in a performance allowing her to obtain the artists' specific allowances, but she was also in rehearsals for three other performances that would take place in 2020, in addition to whatever job opportunity would emerge during the summer.

Some of them also lost the possibility of doing a second job (e.g. waiters in bars or restaurants), and had to rely on financial support from their families, as was the case for Chara, a 35-year old actress:

It's the first time in many years that our parents have supported us. We were able to rely on ourselves in March, April, May. We could not rely on ourselves in June, July, August. [...] I am saying this with a heavy heart and great shame; after all those years of not asking our parents for money, our parents helped us. We were incredibly happy to receive help, but we would have preferred not to.

All of them were deeply anxious and insecure about their future, wondering whether: they would be able to find a job after the lockdown; enough jobs would be available for all; small theatres would be able to reopen, etc. Ioli's testimony voices this frustration and insecurity:

I realised that I don't have a job. The jobs I had were cancelled or postponed, the allowances had stopped. I felt insecure because that's when I realised that the theaters weren't going to put on plays, or the plays they were going to put on would be with very few actors [...], and that now all of a sudden, I'm back to square one. And I also fear that even if the theatres do eventually open [...] will people go? And if the state is unconcerned, most actors won't have a future.

Some of our interviewees also considered the possibility of exiting their profession and finding alternative employment options. Thus, in addition to the socio-economic precariousness of artists, reinforced by the pandemic crisis, there is also an identity-based precariousness which takes the form of a loosening or a decline in the ties that bind artists to their professions and their communities (Barré & Dubuc, 2021). Nikos, a 32-year-old actor, is one such artist:

Before the pandemic, I never had 'leaving the theatre' in mind. [...] From the lockdown onwards, and especially after the lockdown ended, and some theatres started working and I wasn't working at all, I started to think that this thing could last months, maybe years.

The feeling of frustration is deeper for younger actors and actresses who entered the labour market during the financial crisis. As Chara explains, even though the crisis period

has been very difficult in terms of employment conditions, they hoped that with hard work and sacrifice, things would eventually become better. Now she feels nothing but disappointment and discouragement:

Coming out of the economic crisis, we made a great effort, we worked a lot to get from minus to zero, from zero to two [...] Until March, I thought: Well, I've worked hard all these years [...] but now this thing is starting to pay off. I'm starting to live, I'm happy because I'm doing a job that I love. You come to a point where job opportunities start to occur, without striving for them. And the moment you get on your feet, and can say that you have accomplished something, the pandemic comes along and breaks your spirit and takes you to minus ten.

Family support continued to play a major role during the pandemic period, with especially the youngest interviewees confessing that they would not be able to cope without that kind of support. However, those with considerable resources of economic capital (due to family wealth) at their disposal were in a better position.

Generally, during the pandemic, the sector's inequalities became more visible, making precarious actors even more vulnerable since not only did they lose their income from artistic activities, but also their possibility to access supplementary income through para-artistic or non-artistic employment opportunities. The pandemic also revealed the inequalities between the small number of actors with privileged access to national theatres (who were able to continue receiving their salary) and the vast majority of actors working in smaller, less secure venues.

TRADE UNIONISM AND COLLECTIVE ACTION OF ACTORS: FROM 'DISAFFILIATION' TO COMING BACK TO THE UNION DURING THE PANDEMIC CRISIS

The working conditions for actors during the financial crisis are essential for understanding their labour activism since several of our interviewees built their working lives with these facts in mind. Although most of them became members of the HAU after finishing their studies, they were not active (in a few cases, they voted in elections), and rarely turned to their union to denounce employer arbitrariness. Non-activation and 'disaffiliation' from the union stems from structural and ideological factors.

One factor that emerged, in several interviews, as inhibiting in their union activation was the strong party identity of the HAU's board [it was the Democratic Unity of Actors (DEI) close to the Communist Party that was head of the union], which in their eyes was advancing party interests at the expense of defending actors' labour rights. In line with the above, some interviewees added that the HAU appeared to them as an obsolete union, run by people who were inactive, and had nothing in common with the everyday working life of younger actors.

For some, the collapse of the CBA also meant an incapacity of their union to intervene in the private theatre sector, abandoning workers without protection. In addition, a specific mindset, as well as their heterogeneity in terms of income, employment status and artistic ambition, hindered the identification of collective interests (Ertan et al., 2021; Gherardini, 2017). Most of our interviewees highlighted the absence of a collective work consciousness, the existence of an individualised work ethos, where the career path is shaped in individual rather than collective terms, and the fact that often actors did not recognise themselves as workers²⁰. Dean & Greene (2017) define this attitude as

²⁰ Thus, cultivating a sense of injustice is not self-evident in the case of workers who see their work as a calling, feel somehow privileged to be employed and consider the opportunity to work (at any price) as a gift in itself (Simms & Dean, 2015; Umney & Coderre-LaPalme, 2017).

'silent sacrifice', implying a kind of 'tolerance' towards poor working conditions. As Nikos told us:

There is this prejudice that 'you have no right to talk about work... art is a field that does not touch on economics', 'that's another conversation'. [...] So yes, I have this feeling, very strongly, that we are underestimated as a profession. And not only undervalued, but we have embodied it, too. I mean, we're also scared. I think we believe it's kind of fair that this happens to us. Okay, they let us do our hobby and we can't talk about it; we can't criticise somebody because it's also a very closed network: The next producer will find out, the next director will find out, you'll be labelled, you'll be the black sheep and your career will be ruined.

Finally, most of them described a working day that was extremely intensive in terms of work pace, and fragmented as to employment activities. These intensified working condition also meant a lack of free time to engage in collective labour claims.

From the first lockdown in March, 2020 onwards, a 'return to the bosom' of the union is apparent, as evidenced by the tripling of the number of voters in the June, 2020 union elections (from 500 to 1,500, approximately). This stems from a combination of factors, with the pandemic playing the catalytic role.

First, all our interviewees recognised the fact that the coronavirus crisis revealed the 'pathogenesis' and the 'rotten state' of their sector, and metaphorically 'gave them a big slap'. As Víctor, a 44-year-old actor mentioned:

I think the pandemic kind of froze any impetus and at the same time revealed the rot in our system, in terms of wages, actors' insurance, our salaries; we were not getting paid.

Chara's statement likewise veered in the same direction:

[..]with the coronavirus, [...] everything came to a standstill and all the pathogenesis of our sector over the last few years was revealed. It was so well covered [...] It took people falling to pieces to somehow reveal this. So, we became aware of it ourselves. It's not that we didn't know it. We knew it and we knew it very well indeed. But it manifested itself.

The absence of a subsidy policy for artists at the beginning of the first lockdown and the inability of many to receive the artists' allowance in the following months caused feelings of frustration and a sentiment of unjust treatment. For Kelly (2012), the feeling of injustice is the *sine qua non* of collective action. At the same time, accountability/blame, social identification with a group ('us' versus 'them', where the latter are usually the employers) and a small but critical number of leaders/activists who can stimulate this process and channel dissatisfaction into collective organisation and action also play a crucial role. In the case at hand, it is not so much the individual employer as the State (Ministry of Culture) that is seen as the culprit, and the sense of injustice stems from the unequal treatment of the artists' sector during the pandemic period and their invisibility under government policies. Andrew, a 34-year-old actor shares such feelings:

We are non-existent to them. They ignored our working conditions [...] There was no willingness to offer us real practical help. [...] the fact that we were invisible all the time to the Ministry of Culture scares me. [...] It's unacceptable!

The awareness of their precarious situation and vulnerability reinforced their occupational identity as 'art workers' and served as an incentive, mobilising many actors. Thus, in contrast to the individualistic ethos that before the pandemic acted as a barrier to union activation (Dean, 2010), the extent of working problems during the pandemic stressed the need for collective action. It seems that the same condition of precarious employment, which made it difficult to organise in previous years, is currently encouraging workers' demand for protection (Heery & Abbott, 2000). As Dimitris, a 35-year-old actor points out:

We got all the shit in our face, all the twisted situation, and decided to wake up.

Chara, who participated for the first time in the union's election in June, 2020 confesses that she mobilised not for the sake of unionism, per se, but because it was her generation's opportunity and obligation to change the working conditions in their sector:

It's because we had to do something, we had to take matters into our own hands, and fix them. We are the generation that must change things.

Paradoxically, besides its negative effects, the 'imposed inactivity' - in contrast to the intensified work rhythms before the pandemic - meant both time release and what McAdam (1986) calls 'biographical availability' (Pinckney & Rivers, 2020)²¹, offering a fertile ground for discussions and collective processes. As Petros, a 33-year-old actor, points out:

Free time was released [...] due to the pandemic. Because we stopped doing theatre, we finally came out of our shells [...] Someone has excluded us from meeting artistically, so now our meetings took a different turn, necessarily because of this free time. And the turn was to organise ourselves towards something else.

Indeed, it is perhaps precisely this 'enforced inactivity', the closure of workplaces and a shared sense of individual isolation - a characteristic that is seen as an obstacle to worker collective action (Percival & Lee, 2020) - that has provided fertile ground for collectivisation.

It was in the context of these discussions and processes that the SAW initiative emerged on Facebook in April, 2020. Such initiatives are not unfamiliar to the fields of artistic work. De Peuter & Cohen (2015) point to the different forms of resistance by artists, beyond traditional union action, including 'grassroots' groups, online campaigns, partnerships with unions, alternative forms of union activism for workers who do not have access to unions.

SAW was mainly launched by actors/actresses (and dancers). Most of them were young, with an average age of 30-40, entering the actors' profession in the midst of the financial crisis. The majority were in possession of a high-level educational and cultural capital (graduates of prestigious²² drama schools, also often holding a university degree) and enjoyed high recognition, especially in the circles of quality (non-commercial) theatre.

Subsequently, the initiative has brought together 25,000 art workers from different sectors within the fields of art and culture from across Greece, operating on a bottom-up basis. At the heart of SAW's claims was the demand for recognition and visibility of artists' labour (in the eyes of the government). Besides being a Facebook community, SAW created various solidarity structures (e.g. medical care, services to the elderly, as well as to people with mobility problems or chronic diseases, accounting consulting support, psychological support), and launched campaigns (e.g. Respect Art Workers for combating gender-based violence and harassment in the arts' sectors).

The initiative was evaluated positively by most of the interviewees, as SAW seems to have had a catalytic effect in various ways: It made artists' labour problems visible to the authorities and the public; it gave 'voice' mainly to those who were not members of unions, or who were 'alienated' from them; it had a rallying effect, forming a 'space' where mostly the 'generation of the crisis', young actors and actresses, could express themselves. According to initiators and members of the SAW Coordination Committee, the initiative emerged as a need in those sectors where either no unions existed, or where workers were alienated from their unions. This explains the significant number of actors in the initial composition of the initiative.

21 In the context of social movements, McAdam (1986) defines 'biographical availability' as the absence of personal constraints (e.g. full-time employment, family responsibilities), which can increase the cost (in terms of time, money, energy required) and risk (in terms of health, social, economic and legal implications) of participation in movement actions.

22 These include, for example, state drama schools, as well as some private schools with a long-standing presence and a very good reputation in the field of acting.

As Antonis, one of the initiators of the SAW, stated:

SAW emerged, to a large extent thanks to actors and their need to express themselves, through a collective body. And that is why SAW has weakened now, has lost a little bit of its impetus, [...] because we basically went back to our union and other unions emerged.

The case of SAW shows how a social media initiative can forge collective identities and trigger collective processes outside the workplace. Such initiatives can help to overcome negative stereotypes about unions, mobilise a new generation of workers, or more generally people who are reluctant to participate in unions, increase the density of communication and levels of participation, and facilitate the organisation and dissemination of 'swarming' actions (Pasquier & Wood, 2018; Saundry et al., 2006; Wood, 2015).

Despoina, a 37-year-old actress, confirms this collectivisation process:

SAW had all the elements of what we call a revolt [...] it started spontaneously, spontaneously brought together this whole crowd of people that exchange ideas, discuss, try to find creative ways to express themselves. It brought together a lot of people. And somehow, it was a crowd that gathered, mobilised and forced the Ministry to take a position.

At the same time, the fact that SAW was able to frame the artists' claims with an informed and 'legal' discourse that placed artists first and foremost as workers with rights has also been important. The ability to decompose the Ministry's arguments in legal terms, quite uncommon among artists, was highly appreciated by those in favour of the SAW initiative.

As Anna told us:

This movement that started on social media, first of all highlighted a lot of problems in the sector [...] I liked that because they organised, and they had lawyers, they didn't write the nonsense that I or all of us can write on Facebook.

However, this new form of digital activism is seen by some interviewees as simply 'slacktivism', as a costless and ineffective kind of action that creates the illusion of political activism. In this case, interviewees highlight the Internet and mobilisation limits of the initiative (Pasquier & Wood, 2018; Wood, 2015). The testimony of Thomas, a 43-year-old actor, reflects this kind of criticism:

I am generally a little suspicious of social media movements of this type, not only in our sector, but generally [...] I don't think that through Facebook, Twitter we will be able to organise resistance and revolution. It certainly did not do any harm in terms of making how much artists were affected during this period more widely known. [...] But I do not think it can go further. It is just a platform for information and exchanging views. So much for that!

Members of the SAW's organising group also pointed out its extra-institutional role. From their perspective, this was partly positive because an Internet initiative is not subject to the institutional boundaries within which a union operates, and can thus turn into more innovative forms of activism (Pasquier & Wood, 2018). On the other hand, both the fact that it does not have an 'institutional face', like unions, and the limitations on claiming in formal terms (Bellini & Lucciarini, 2019; Saundry et al., 2007), triggered actors that are members of the initiative to participate at the ballot box in union elections in June, 2020. These limitations are shown by Pavlos, a 37-year-old actor, member of the SAW initiative, who participated in the recent union elections:

SAW has no statutory role. We were not elected by the steering group. We could not negotiate with institutions. [...] This extra-institutional role has helped us

very often to operate in a more activist way, to be more confrontational [...] but at the same time, it does not give us the possibility to do politics.

During the HAU elections in June 2020, and due to the collective processes that have taken place since the beginning of the pandemic, new parties (that are at the head of the union now) are running for a position on the board of the union, most of them putting forward a non-partisan identity. Thus, actors who in previous years had abstained partly because of the board's close relationship with a particular party, 'came back' to the union, participated in the elections, and generally became more active. Anna, was one of them:

Now after Covid, things have changed very much - and this is a very good thing that happened - and many voices have come into the union, partisan and not. That is the reason why many actors voted, like I did, after many years.

The presence of 'new blood' on the unions' board, and the decision of young actors to run for the elections, many of whom interviewees felt a kindred spirit with due to shared work experiences, seems to have played a crucial role. As Stelios, a 36-year-old actor states:

Some of the people participating are young, well-educated, active, and they know exactly what present-day working conditions mean [...] To me, the guys are quite active, and they are trying to find solutions.

Ioli shares the same point of view:

People have been elected to the HAU who I know; we are the same age, I know their background, I know that they have struggled, and that they understand what I am going through. [...] There's also the voice of the generation that I belong to.

For those coming from the SAW initiative, and even though they had no union experience, SAW seems to have provided them with a knowledge capital and has acted as a kind of 'education for unionism'. Entering the HAU has also meant the transfer of organisational resources previously exploited in SAW: a more 'legal' language and a more informed discourse. As Petros, who is coming from the SAW initiative and currently is a member of the HAUs' board, told us:

Knowing the laws now and being able to propose the exact agenda to achieve the CBA is essential [...] We gained this from SAW. Because it is there where we saw that it is a really powerful tool. [...] And it also shows a seriousness from the union's side.

Most of our interviewees seem to appreciate this practical oriented, problem-solving logic. The position of Maria is indicative of this point of view:

(T)here is an attempt, for the first time, to build up a legal language for our sector's claims, and there is a possibility that at some point it will be considered as a profession rather than a hobby.

Nevertheless, not all share the same opinion. From the interviews with members or supporters of the radical left-oriented Assembly of Struggling Actors (SAI), or the communist DEI, it becomes clear that more confrontational forms of action are often preferred. As Nikos, a member of the SAI, states:

Within the union, there are conflicting forces. The board of the union has a more conciliatory and managerial logic, in the sense that they want to avoid at all costs a conflict with the Ministry, the direction of the National Theatre. They want to avoid clashing or calling a strike against employers in the theatre industry's private sector.

Regardless of the prevailing logic, mobilisations are at the core of the HAU activity. The willingness of workers to participate in union activity (whether it is a strike or other forms of protest) has considerably preoccupied industrial relations scholars, who usually put

forward a range of ideological and rational motivations²³. Participation in mobilisations and strikes is seen as one of the key areas for assessing the effectiveness and strength of a trade union (alongside union density and bargaining power). The study of the actors' participation in the mobilisations from March 2020 onwards should consider two factors. First, unlike traditional union action -related to a specific workplace or directed against a specific employer -, in the case examined, art workers' mobilisations take place with the workplaces closed, while claims are addressed towards the State (and not an employer). Secondly, the mobilisations take place within the limits imposed by containment measures with the fear and risk of infection²⁴.

After the first and very massive pan-cultural mobilisation on 7th May 2020, participation in the following mobilisations, according to interviewees, was not equal, and was certainly disproportionate to the 'voices of protest' on social networks. Ioli confirms this:

If you go on Facebook [...] from morning till night, there is a Facebook- revolution, and the other day there was a pan-cultural march and only a handful of people participated.

On the other hand, some are relatively satisfied, given the prevalence of individualised work ethos of actors, and the fact that even a few people were mobilised. As Thomas told us:

I think that participation is satisfying because if we think that for many years now there has been a trend in the artistic world that the artist should be withdrawn from politics and be more dedicated to his art, I think it's good that people have mobilised and taken to the streets.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article we have attempted to highlight the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis on the employment conditions and livelihoods of actors/actresses in Greece, and the factors that triggered their activation outside and within their union during that time. Like any qualitative research, the present study has its limits and cannot lead to generalisable results but aims to highlight certain pertinent meanings as they emerge from the interviewees' accounts.

Our findings confirm the results of on-going research about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on cultural workers and artistic labour markets. Recent studies in this field have shown that the Covid-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerability of cultural workers, since many of them not only lost job positions and opportunities but were also excluded from access to state support due to peculiarities in their employment models. Thus, the current situation revealed the structural problems of the highly unregulated labour markets of artists, such as the low affiliation rate for social security systems, the lack of institutional professional recognition and the gaps of the statutes that regulate their activity (Pérez Ibáñez & López-Aparicio Pérez, 2018a). Moreover, it demonstrated the key role of the state in regulating the highly deregulated artistic labour markets and the way cultural policy regimes shape the concrete working practices and conditions of 'ordinary' art workers (Bataille et al., 2020b).

Furthermore, in Southern European countries such as Greece, which have experienced almost a decade of the aftermath of the financial crisis and austerity policies, art workers

²³ Due to word limitation, we cannot examine in depth the relevant literature.

²⁴ For Pinckney & Rivers (2020), while not all forms of activism entail an increased risk of infection, many of the most prominent social movement actions involve concentration in large groups. Thus a 'low risk' action may turn into a 'high risk' one due to the risk of infection, which affects the number and profile of those willing to participate.

seem to be living in a state of continuous crisis²⁵. As [Serino \(2020\)](#) also points out, sectors such as the performing, which are 'ontologically precarious', have suffered more severely than other sectors from the effects of the financial crisis. This applies to both artists who have known the situation prior to the financial crisis [since they have been confronted while the drastic reduction of their income (a "force that deformed them") and "the young generation of artists 'born' professionally during the crisis", that have not known a different situation ([Pérez Ibáñez & López-Aparicio Pérez, 2018b](#), p. 223).

What differentiates the two crises (financial, pandemic), as to their consequences on actors'/actresses' (or more generally artists') livelihoods, is that during the financial crisis, they were somehow able to cope by means of complementary income streams, and by developing resilience strategies (such as co-creation, shared and collaborative projects), while during the pandemic these additional income sources also stopped and many alternative options have been exhausted.

Nevertheless, paradoxically, the Covid -19 pandemic provided fertile ground for an activation of actors'/actresses that initially took place mainly outside their union. Despite the constraints imposed through containment and social-distancing measures, the enforced inactivity and the exposure of vulnerability incited collective discussions and triggered collective processes, due to fewer time constraints, but mainly because of the actors' own awareness of the precariousness of their working conditions.

Facing a situation of pervasive economic uncertainty - what Standing names "unknown unknowns" - and despite their individualised ethos and a combination of characteristics conjuring up "an image of a lonely crowd", actors found a "common ground" stemming from an experience of vulnerability and deep insecurity. Their struggle for visibility, recognition and representation ([Standing, 2014, 2015](#)) could pave the way towards a collective organisation and action of precarious workers ([Cohen, 2012](#)), as well as a conceptualisation of solidarity beyond the boundaries of wage labour ([Strauß & Fleischmann, 2020](#)).

In addition, the shortcomings of the support measures caused feelings of generalised discontent and sentiments of unjust treatment, since from their point of view, they were 'invisible' to the State. In contrast to a specific mindset that is considered to be an obstacle to artists' unionisation (individualised working ethos, auto-exploitation, not seeing themselves as workers, and what they do as work), artists are now claiming to be seen and recognised as (precarious) workers.

At this critical moment, it seems that SAW played a catalytic role, both because it acted as a 'channel of expression' of discontent, and it made artists visible as workers. Regardless of its limits (institutional and Internet-based), the case of SAW demonstrates how networks like this can trigger labour solidarity and become a new channel for representing workers' interests outside the workplace, having a complementary and mutually reinforcing (rather than competitive) relationship with traditional unions. Thus, in line with previous research on unions' renewal, the case of SAW demonstrates how extra-union processes of collectivisation may reinforce and revitalise existent union structures.

As to whether the recent developments within the HAU are an indication of union revitalisation, the presence of 'new blood' on the union's board, with a different understanding of unionism are moving in this direction. In terms of results, it is premature to assess the long-term effects of the changes involved - as to union power and increased bargaining capacity - and/or the effectiveness and sheer size of the mobilisations. At the time of writing, although the signature of the CBA remains a priority, the extraordinary pandemic situation, as well as the wave of allegations of sexual, verbal and physical violence in the theatre sector have somewhat differentiated the union's priorities.

25 In their research on women artists in Spain, [Pérez Ibáñez & López-Aparicio Pérez \(2018a\)](#) demonstrate how a habitual situation of precariousness has been aggravated by the financial crisis.

In any case, the extraordinary Covid-19 pandemic situation, despite its indisputably negative consequences for employment conditions, might also act as an opportunity and a driver to regulate the actors' labour market. Currently, there are two developments in the acting industry that have led us to such a conclusion. Firstly, due to the wave of allegations regarding sexual, verbal and physical violence in the theatre sector and the upsurge of the #metoo movement, HAU has triggered for the first time many decades-old disciplinary proceedings against accused actors. Many of the HAU's board consider this movement as an opportunity to bring order to their extremely deregulated labour market and for 'catharsis' in the profession²⁶. And in the same way that the pandemic brought to light the 'pathogenesis' of the sector and mobilised workers, it also brought to light the abusive behaviours associated with precarious work²⁷. Secondly, the private theatre owners in Greece have decided to reestablish an employers' organisation and to enter into negotiations for a new CBA with the HAU. This development cannot be seen independently of the fact that in order to benefit from support measures, private theatre owners have to be able to prove that they are officially employing workers.

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26 As the president of the HAU, points out in an interview, this phenomenon of abusive behaviors derives from employment insecurity: "...when the actor is so weak, has no money and tries to secure his position in the theatre he is subjected to humiliation." <https://www.lifo.gr/culture/theatro/aforites-synthikes-ergasias-misthoi-peinas-ekmetalleysi-somateio-ellinon-ithopoiou>

27 "The Coronavirus brought so many bad things, but it also brought a good thing: it made us think, to look deep inside ourselves. Many colleagues found things inside themselves that had been troubling them for years but that the rhythm of their work forced them to keep buried. The memoranda did great damage to our sector. We lived more than 12 years of complete insecurity. Actors were paid 200 euros in terms and conditions that were degrading. We were all forced to make concessions and tolerate a lot" (President of the HAU) <https://parallaximag.gr/featured/spyro-mpimpila-giati-oi-ithopoiou-milisan-tora>

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