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Miners, local communities, Company and State in the Interwar period: 1929, a strike in Kassandra Mines (Halkidiki, Northern Greece)¹

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ABSTRACT

This article examines thoroughly the strike erupted in the mining district of Halkidiki (N. Greece) in January of 1929. The exploitation of the so-called “Mines of Kassandra” belonged to a well-established company, one of the most profitable of the country. This company used the ore extracted from the above mentioned mine in order to produce fertilizers. Having its headquarters in Athens it was very close to the center of political power. So the Liberal government, feeling strong after the electoral triumph of preceding August, primarily supports the employees. The use of local and national Press, which verifies the facts in daily basis was imperative due to the lack of official statistical data. The Labor movement with its divisions and the inhabitants of the concerned villages also play a crucial role.

Halkidiki is a place known today worldwide for its natural beauty and as a much acclaimed tourist destination. Since at least the Ottoman domination, going back to 15th century, it has been also a place of particular mineral interest.² Most of the mines in question are situated in the northern-east part of this peninsula. There an example

¹ This paper constitutes part of a research for my PhD thesis on *Mines in Northern Greece, 1912-1940* under the supervision of the Ass. Prof. Leda Papastefanaki.

² Elias Kolovos – Phokion Kotzageorgis, “Halkidiki in the early Modern Period: Towards an Environmental History”, *Mines, Olives and Monasteries. Aspects of Halkidiki’s Environmental History*, ed. by Basil C. Gounaris, Thessaloniki 2015: p. 123-161.

of a “company town”- which constitutes a rarity for the Greek case – can be found, namely the port of Straton in the coastline.³ The minerals excavated in the mountainous zone – where the village actually named Stratoniki is situated – were delivered to the port in order to be transferred on ships and commercialized elsewhere. During the late Ottoman Empire, when capitalism entered in a rather aggressive way in the empire⁴ these mines were given in concession to an ottoman Société Anonyme founded with French capital and quoted in the Paris Stock Exchange Market called “Société des Mines de Cassandra” (1893).⁵ In 1912, as a result of the Balkan Wars, the area becomes part of the Modern Greek State with the neighboring city of Thessaloniki. In 1920, and in a more lucid way in 1927, the mines of Kassandra pass over to the “Greek Société Anonyme of Chemical Products and Fertilizers” (Anonymē Hellēnikē Etaireia Hēmikōn Proiontōn kai Lipasmatōn – AEEHPL) founded in Athens in 1909, in order to use the iron pyrite extracted there in its own fertilizers. But a large part of the mineral was intended to the export trade.⁶ In this article I am going to examine the strike which occurred in these mines during the first month of 1929. The first time I came across this strike was during a research in the Press archives undertaken in order to collect material for my PhD thesis – Mines in Northern Greece, 1912-1940 – and what mainly struck me was its persistence as it lasted 29 days. I had never seen another strike so well documented with articles appearing in the newspapers – local as well as national - in an almost daily basis. Initially, I shall give some brief information about the political situation

³ Maria Lilibaki-Spyropoulou, *Χαλκιδική. Η εξέλιξη του οικιστικού δικτύου κατά την περίοδο 1912-1960* [Halkidiki. The evolution of residential areas, 1912-1960], Polygyros 2014: p. 283-297.

⁴ Şevket Pamuk, *The Ottoman Empire and European Capitalism, 1820-1913*, Cambridge University Press 1987. Especially on the mining sector in the age of capitalism cf. Alaaddin Tok, *The Ottoman Mining Sector in the Age of Capitalism. An analysis of State-Capital Relations (1850-1908)*. Saarbrücken, Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011.

⁵ Pech E., *Manuel des sociétés anonymes fonctionnant en Turquie*, Παρίσι 1906³: p. 138-140; www.entreprises-coloniales.fr/proche-orient/Mines_de_Kassandra.pdf ; Leda Papastefanaki, *Η φλέβα της γης. Τα μεταλλεία της Ελλάδας, 19^{ος}-20^{ος} αιώνας* [The vein of the earth. The mines of Greece, 19th-20th century], Athens 2017: p. 81.

⁶ On the plural activities of this Company cf. Eleni Maistrou – Demetra Mavrokordatou – George Mahairas – Nick Bellavillas – Leda Papastefanaki – John Polyzos, *Ανώνυμη Ελληνική Εταιρεία Χημικών Προϊόντων και Λιπασμάτων (1909-1993). Λιπάσματα Δραπετσώνας* [Société Anonyme of Chemical Products and Fertilizers (1909-1993). Fertilizers of Drapetsona], ed. PIOP, Athens 2007.

in Greece at the time.⁷ In the aftermath of the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 the situation was complicated since at least 1.200.000 refugees from Turkey arrived in Greece during the first – and only in the World history - compulsory Population Exchange. Political instability was the sign of the period and there was even a brief period of dictatorship by Pangalos (1925-26). Winner of the elections of 19 August 1928 was declared Eleutherios Venizelos and his Liberal Party (Komma Fileleutheron). Since 1910, Venizelos acts in many ways as a protagonist of the Greek political life. The refugees of Asia Minor who arrived in Greece after or even before the Treaty of Lausanne express their adoration towards him. In his election campaign speech in Thessaloniki (July of 1928), he explicitly refers to the strikes. He declares his intention to regulate the rights either of work or strike (or lock-out on behalf of the employers) by a special law.⁸ His behavior is not peculiar and does not constitute an *unicum*. He is just another one of the state leaders of the period who share a common anxiety trying hard to defend the society, and first of all the working class, against the intrusion of the communist doctrine. Since his first time as a Prime Minister – in the 1910s - he paid much attention in conciliating the classes. In 1918 a Party called SEKE (Socialist Labor Party of Greece) was created and in 1924 changes its name in KKE (Communist Party of Greece). During the dictatorship of General Pangalos (1925-1926) this party is declared illegal. The Trade Union movement on the other hand after 1923 was characterized by internal conflicts, splits and divisions. In 1918 the GSEE (Greek General Confederation of Labor) was created under direct instigation of Eleutherios Venizelos. In 1925 GSEE distanced itself from KKE. The Communist Party in its turns founded a parallel Confederation just after the strike (founding Congress beginning on 3rd February 1929). In the beginning of 1929 in Thessaloniki there are two “Centers”, second-level trade unions, “Ergatiko Kentro”, founded in 1917 with the intervention of Venizelos himself during his Provisionary Government in Thessaloniki, at that time under the auspices of Communist Party, and

⁷ On the political situation in Greece in this period and the Labor movement cf. Antonis Liakos, *Εργασία και Πολιτική στην Ελλάδα του Μεσοπολέμου. Το Διεθνές Γραφείο Εργασίας και η ανάδυση των κοινωνικών θεσμών* [Labor and Politics in thw Interwar Greece. The International Labor Organization and the emergence of the social institutions], Athens 1993.

⁸ Stefanos Stefanou, *Τα κείμενα του Ελευθερίου Βενιζέλου, 1909-1936* [Eleutherios Venizelos' Speeches, 1909-1936], Athens 1983, v. III, p. 467-468.

“Panergatiko Kentro”, founded in 1926 linked to GSEE and patronized by the Government.

As in Greece there is no availability of official statistical data on strikes of the time we are going to chronicle the strike using two newspapers as primary sources, *Makedonia*, a rather conservative paper with a Venizelist attitude, founded in 1911 in Thessaloniki and *Rizospastis* (=Radical), founded in 1917 in Athens which expresses the official view of the Communist Party. None of these papers has any photograph of the strike and presumably no journalist ever came even near Stratoniki during the strike. The use of photographs - was going to change after 3 years when journalists and photographers arrived in order to record a natural disaster, an earthquake which occurred in the same zone and affected even the mines. All the information we have about the strike is based on telegrams, oral information, declarations of the interested parties...

On January the 5th, not a great month for strikes, according to a Greek scholar who studied the Labor Movement in Thessaloniki in the period 1908-1936,⁹ the strike was declared in Stratoniki with the newspapers to announce it the following day.¹⁰ But this event was far from un-announced since the previous day (the evening of 4th January) the Chief Commander of Gendarmerie of Thessaloniki had been sent to the area following orders from above. The strike began as an effect of a conflict between the police forces and the strikers resulting into four (4) casualties. It is not very lucid why this strike happened and why in this particular moment. The miners of the “Mines de Cassandra” since 1922 had their own union trade representation. It was called “Association of Miners of Isvoron (the name of Stratoniki till 1926) “The Progress”(Syndesmos Metallorychon Isvorou, E Proodos). I have found the statutory text of this Association in the General State Archives/Historical Archive of Macedonia according to which it followed a communist view as shown by its vocabulary at least at the time of its establishment. In 1929 none of its founders

⁹ Kostas Fountanopoulos, *Εργασία και εργατικό κίνημα στη Θεσσαλονίκη* [Labor and Labor Movement in Thessaloniki, 1908-1936], Athens 2005.

¹⁰ *Makedonia, Rizospastis*, 6/1/1929. Very briefly refers to this strike Demetrios Livieratos, *Κοινωνικοί αγώνες στην Ελλάδα, 1927-1931* [Social Conflicts in Greece, 1927-1931], Athens 1987: p. 100.

participate to the strike and according to *Makedonia* this association makes part of Panergatiko Kentro Thessalonikis and it is affiliated to GSEE.¹¹

According to a telegram sent by the strikers to the Minister - General Governor of Macedonia, Periklis Kallidopoulos, an officer of the army, who was related to Halkidiki as his mother was native of a village there,¹² this strike was meant as a protest against the terrorist measures taken by the Company.¹³ As a motive was mentioned that 5 miners got fired by the Company and one of them was the leader of the local trade union, the above mentioned “Association of Miners of Isvoron”, Synadis Synadis. It seems that the strike began as a spontaneous reaction to this fact, but I think it is quite clear that the miners were not pleased at all with the Director of the Mines and with some foremen who treated them with cruelty. The miners attacked engineers and foremen. According to the newspapers there were 4 casualties. The Chief Officer of the Gendarmerie asked for special reinforcements. The strike continued on and 7 miners got arrested. The newspapers were intensively interested in reporting the presence of two major players in the area. One of them is the representative of the “Ergatiko Kentro” – communists – and the other one is the “self-acclaimed” general secretary of GSEE, Aristide Demetratos, a controversial figure, future Minister of Labour during the dictatorship of General I. Metaxas (1936-1941). The latter is considered as a “traitor” by the communist paper *Rizospastis*. After a general assembly, probably under Demetratos’ influence, the strikers decided to return to work if the Company hired back the ones who got arrested. They do not seem to demand anything further; they just want their companions back to work. On the other hand the representative of the Communist Party was not allowed to deliver a speech to the miners as he got arrested in the meantime. The only thing he managed to do was to address an open letter to the miners. It was highly recommended that they should strike demanding better working conditions, raise of their wages and the return of

¹¹ On the same page cf. Alexandros Dagkas, *Για μια κοινωνική ιστορία της υπαίθρου. Η περιφέρεια Θεσσαλονίκης στον 20ό αιώνα. Η περίοδος έως το 1945* [For a social history of the countryside. The region of Thessaloniki in the 20th century. The period to 1945], Thessaloniki 2010: p. 487-488.

¹² Liana Alexandri, *Στρατηγός Περικλής Καλλιδόπουλος. Μια οικογένεια – μια ιστορία* [General Periklis Kallidopoulos. A family – a history], Thessaloniki 1990.

¹³ I think that here we can see, as does the aforementioned Kostas Fountanopoulos for the Labor Movement in Thessaloniki of the period in question, *mutatis mutandis* of course, a segment of the concept “moral economy” that E. P. Thompson in his classical study *The making of the English working class*, introduced.

their own Social Fund in their hands as it was administrated at the time in a rather arbitrary way by the Company. Anyway even with the intromission of Demetratos, no agreement between the Company and the miners was achieved as the Company refused to respond to the miners' claims.

The 12th of January an Inspector of Labor, officer of the Ministry of National Economy, and a Supervisor of Labor attaché to the General Governor of Macedonia headed to Stratoniki after a group of miners paid a visit to the General Governor. Among the latter was the President of their trade union. According *Rizospastis* this was a movement intended by Demetratos in order to leave headless the strikers and, thus, to be easier to manipulate. But the local communities began to adhere to the strike. A rally with the widows and the orphans of the miners killed in the pits leading took place at which they “anathematize” (= they curse while throwing stones) the government and the company for not having agreed to their petitions and remove the Director of the Company, Spyros Demoulitsas¹⁴ who used methods of extreme cruelty against the miners.

The General Governor Kallidopoulos went to Athens where he met the Minister of National Economy, P. Vourloumis, and he expresses the wishful thinking that the company should hire back the strikers. The attitude of the Company remained irremovable by refusing to listen to the proposals of the General Governor. In the meantime in Halkidiki two facts occurred that stirred up the situation and were considered by the company as sabotage. On January, 20, a “bomb” exploded in a warehouse and the chains of two elevators used to remove mineral stock were damaged. The Director of the Kassandra Mines, Demoulitsas, began the counter-attack using *Makedonia* in his favor. He denies that he had prohibited the distribution of certain newspapers (e.g., *Rizospastis*) in the zone and he defended himself by giving another visual of the facts; he declared that the leader of the trade union was manipulated by a miner who got fired recently and that was the reason the strike bursted. Two miners get arrested and were convicted by the Court of First Instance in Polygyros – the capital of the region on Halkidiki - to imprisonment for the sabotage.

¹⁴ On Spyros Demoulitsas, civil engineer, who was employed for many years in mines, see Leda Papastefanaki, “Mining Engineers, industrial modernization and politics in Greece, 1870-1940”, *The Historical Revue/Revue Historique*, 13 (2016) 71-115.

On January, 22, members of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party paid a visit to the Minister of National Economy, P. Vourloumis, handing him a memorandum about the Congress they were about to have on February, 3, for a separate Confederation they intended to found and protesting against the use of repressive measures of the Government against the workers. They even expressed orally their preoccupation about the situation in Stratoniki. The Minister replied that “the State can not interfere” in the case of a strike and regarding the repressive measures that they were meant “to maintain the order”. On January, 26, another newspaper, *Makedonika Nea*, refer to the action of an open investigation against the police forces regarding excessive use of violence. *Rizospastis* mentioned that the representative of a solidarity society called Εργατική Βοήθεια [Labor Aid]¹⁵ and also executive member of the Ergatiko Kentro was arrested the moment he was about to provide the strikers with financial aid. Nonetheless the Company remained still in its positions. The Company’s attitude, or maybe Demoulitsas’ attitude(?) becomes even more cruel. Not only he prohibited the distribution of certain newspapers but he did not allow the local bakery to produce bread. A worker intended to buy foodstuff was severely beaten by the police force. There were even suspicions that the Company had intention of evicting the workers from its houses. Demoulitsas declared through “Makedonia” that the accusations were false and after this declaration two more declarations of workers and employees appeared – they were refugees as they tended to specify – who were protesting against all these “trouble-makers”, meaning the strikers. As a last resource even the Prefect of Halkidiki went to Stratoniki trying to conciliate the two opposite groups.

In the meantime in Athens during a parliamentary session an MP, Xanthopoulos, as reported by *Rizospastis*, was addressing a letter composed by the miners’ wives who wished to address the Prime Minister in their poor condition. They asked for his intervention as it was him that in the last strike, some days before the elections, prevented a catastrophe. The last day of January began with another big demonstration of the villagers, but the newspapers on 2nd of February mentioned that the strike had been terminated. *Makedonia* mentioned it as a fact, but *Rizospastis* put a

¹⁵ Kostas Euthymiou, «Εργατική Βοήθεια» και «Κοινωνική Αλληλεγγύη». Δύο παραδείγματα ταξικής αλληλεγγύης δράσης στην Ελλάδα του Μεσοπολέμου [“Labor Aid” and “Social Solidarity”. Two examples of class solidarity action in Interwar Greece], Athens 2014.

question mark after the statement. What has changed in a couple of days? A telegram stating that the Prime Minister had given his “parole d’honneur” to intercede to the Company? The fear that the workers would definitely lose their jobs? It is not clear neither the beginning of the strike, nor is the finishing. In the 1st of February began the big strike of the miners in Laurium. In our case the strikers were about 700, in the case of Laurium they were more than 2.000. Even there the local community was in their side. But this strike was a “success” according *Rizospastis*.¹⁶ After 47 days of strike and 1 dead miner the agreement with the Company was a success for the miners. But it is not our intention to compare the two strikes in this occasion.

And I wish to close this article referring to another matter, the voting by the Parliament of a specific law, called *Idionymon* (Law 4229/1929). The law was enacted by Venizelos’ government and clearly stipulated the imprisonment of those who attempting to implement ideas obviously aimed at overthrowing the established social regime by the use of violence or by detaching the [national] territory.¹⁷ It is a parliamentary democracy that supports such a legislation convicting ideas and not actions. This Bill was presented at the Parliament the last days of 1928, it came under discussion on March 1929 and approved on July. Since early January *Rizospastis* referred against this Bill, which was meant to penalize especially the Labor movement and the newspaper called in for action. Some months before the enactment of the *Idionymon*, we have the peculiar occasion where two strikers of Stratoniki, declared innocent by the Court of Appeal of Thessaloniki, were convicted to forced deportation in the island of Anafi by the local Committee of Security of Halkidiki! And I can possibly assume that this conviction was executed.

In my opinion this strike began in a very critical moment, it had some features of a popular riot, the demands were clearly amplifying the respect of the human dignity than of economic nature. The strikers were found in the middle of internal conflicts of

¹⁶ On this strike at Laurium see Fotini Orfanou, *Γαλλική Εταιρεία Μεταλλείων Λαυρίου: 1900-1930* [Société Française des Mines du Laurium: 1900-1930], unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Athens 2002: p. 227-241.

¹⁷ Cf. Nikos Alivizatos, *Οι πολιτικοί θεσμοί σε κρίση, 1922-1974. Όψεις της ελληνικής εμπειρίας* [Political Institutions in Crisis (1922-1974). Aspects of the Greek experience], Athens 1983; Anna Koumandaraki, *Labour Identity in the Semi-periphery. The case of the Greek Trade-Union Movement*, unpublished Ph.D thesis, Univ. of Essex 1995; ead., “The Greek trade-union movement in controversy: against a state-centered approach in labor movement theory”, *Workers of the World. International Journal on Strikes and Social Conflicts*, vol. 1, n. 1 (June 2012) 117-132.

the Labor movement. The nearby communities were on their side but in that moment their intervention could not be very effective. We do not have a happy follow-up. Often the newspaper *Makedonia* reports accidents in the Mines of Kassandra and on the 5th of September the same paper reports that after a General Assembly the miners reported their demands about social care, regulation of working hours, provision about accidents and demanding to be hired the ones who got fired or at least be granted a severance pay. The company rejected these claims even if this time they were properly addressed and I think that we understand that the end of this strike was definitely no success.