

The containment of labour in accelerated global supply chains: the case of Piraeus Port

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a case study of the sale of two of the three piers at the formerly state-owned container port of Piraeus, in Greece to a Chinese company, COSCO, forming a crucial hub in the transit of goods to European markets, and examines the impacts on labour. It places this study in the context of the global consolidation, restructuring and acceleration of supply chains as well as in the specific context of privatisation of infrastructure and deregulation of labour in Greece in the aftermath of the debt crisis. Anatomising the tangled dynamics of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, it illustrates the complexity of the interrelationships between specific local factors and global forces in reshaping work. It also shows how the fragmentation of labour resulting from these impacts makes it easy for global corporations in the logistics sector both to consolidate their power and to evade contemporary forms of labour mobilisation. After chronicling the forms of resistance adopted by workers at the port, the article concludes by reflecting on the implications for organisation along the increasingly tightly integrated supply chains which link the labour of production workers with that of logistics workers.

Introduction

One of the most striking, but least visible, features of the Internet Age has been the speed with which the virtual and the real have been knitted together in the circuitry of global markets, using processes that compress and decompress space and time like the air inside an accordion. In doing so, they do not just consolidate control of these markets in the hands of a relatively small number of global players, they also radically restructure the relationship between the public and the private, concentrating power

in supranational corporate entities away from public scrutiny or accountability. The global markets that are currently reaching maturity rest not only on global divisions of labour (geographically dispersed, though centrally managed) but also on global systems of communication and distribution. These in turn rest on infrastructures which are increasingly interconnected, both with each other and with the value chains of the commodity producers.

As the interfaces become more fluid between the ordering, manufacturing and delivery of goods and services (between production and consumption more broadly) the boundaries shift between the firms supplying these functions, and the competition between them intensifies, each encroaching on the territory of its neighbours, resulting in tectonic sectoral shifts. Manufacturers become retailers which become wholesalers which become shipping companies. Telecommunications companies morph into broadcasters which in turn gobble up publishers. Toy companies merge with software companies to produce online games featuring characters developed by movie companies. Brands (whose owners manufacture nothing directly) attach themselves to everything from shoes to clothes to bags to jewellery to perfume.

Underlying these dynamic shifts is a cold logic of consolidation in which the processes carried out online (advertising, ordering, customer service and management of the elaborated value chains by which commodities are produced and distributed and the co-ordination of all these interconnected functions) are increasingly integrated with the physical circuits of goods: the transport of materials across land and ocean from mine to refinery to factory to assembly plant to depot to warehouse to the supermarket or directly to the home of the consumer.

This creates an imperative for global corporations to maximise their access to and control of the infrastructure – whether this involves the telecommunications networks used for online communication or the physical infrastructure (and preferably both) – so that goods can reach their markets as quickly and cheaply and frictionlessly as possible.

Shifting control of infrastructure

During most of the 20th century, much of this infrastructure was owned and maintained by national governments: postal and telecommunications services, seaports, airports, roads and railways, giving national governments the power to set standards, charges and terms of use and to monitor traffic across frontiers. The first big sell-offs to the private sector, starting in the 1980s, were of telecommunications and of airports, in a process begun by the UK Thatcher Government (which privatised both British Telecom and the British Airports Authority in 1984). Telecommunications privatisation was pushed at the European level into becoming a requirement for all EU Member States, first covered in the Utilities Directive in 1990 (Directive 90/351), then (after European Commission Green papers were published in 1994 and 1995) a European telecoms market was formally brought into being on 1 January 1998, with a further 2002 Directive (Directive 2002/21) setting out a common regulatory framework for the ‘electronic communications sector’. Postal services went the same way, with last EC member states abolishing the remaining sections of their national post monopolies in

2013 (Hermann, 2014) after a 15-year process of creeping privatisation (via Directives 97/67, 2002/39 and 2008/6).

Meanwhile, another series of EU Directives brought about the 'demonopolisation' of rail networks, covering, respectively cross border freight (Directive 2001/12). Track Allocation and access charges (2001/14), and access to the Trans European Rail Freight Network by licensed rail freight operators (2004/51). And, by the end of 2010, 22% of Europe's 404 main airports were either wholly investor-owned or had public-private partnerships (National Center for Policy Analysis, 2014).

What happened in Europe took place in a more piecemeal way across the rest of the world, pushed by various policies adopted by the International Telecommunications Union (founded in 1992) and the World Trade Organisation (see Huws, 2012 for a fuller discussion of these).

Many of these formerly State-owned services have become major global corporations in their own right, with over 20 featuring repeatedly among the top 100 companies listed in the UNCTAD World Investment Report from 1996 to 2006 (Clifton & Diaz-Fuentes, 2008). Increasingly, however, their sectoral identities as universal service providers are blurring as they move into other activities. Simultaneously, their traditional terrain is being aggressively targeted by companies from other sectors. Amazon, for instance, formed partnerships with US Postal Services in several US states to provide Sunday deliveries of goods to its customers in 2013 (Greenfield, 2013) under a deal whose terms were kept secret, though it was revealed that the agreement would 'not require USPS to pay employees overtime and that the scheduling needs related to Sunday delivery ... will be handled by existing staff' (Adinolfie, 2013). Since then, Amazon has also set up its own independent delivery service in California (Bensinger & Stevens, 2014). Meanwhile Google has established a rival 'Shopping Express' service in Silicon and San Francisco, with plans to expand over most of Northern California, delivering retail products straight to homes on the same day they are ordered online, in direct competition with Amazon (Wohlsen, 2014).

Restructuring and acceleration of supply chains

Amazon's strategy, sometimes described as its 'Flywheel of Growth' (see for instance Kirby & Stewart, 2007) is based on maximising the selection of products, using scale to lower the cost of goods, and accepting very small profit margins in order to do so. This logic extends beyond its role as a retailer to its role as a hardware manufacturer. Jeff Bezos, Amazon's founder, is quoted as saying that 'We sell our hardware near break-even, so we make money when people USE the device, not when they BUY the device' (Hof, 2012). This strategy depends crucially on getting the goods to customers as speedily as possible, which in turn requires tight supply chain management – 'planning and co-ordinating the materials flow from source to user as an integrated system' (Christopher, 2013:6). Amazon has also recently begun to take advantage of its monopsonistic position by aggressively putting pressure on its suppliers to reduce their prices, including using sanctions such as refusing to accept pre-orders for e-book titles from Hachette and videos from Warner Brothers, until these companies agree a price deal more favourable to Amazon (Rushe, 2014).

In Amazon's case, as with offline supermarkets such as Walmart, Tesco and Carrefour, control of this supply chain has been tipped in favour of the buyer, rather than the producer. In an apparent paradox, this control becomes tighter even as supply chains get longer, through additional levels of outsourcing. With the manufacture of very similar products increasingly dispersed, and the growing importance of the supply chain, it has been argued that we are moving into an era where competition takes place not between companies but between supply chains, a competition that is exacerbated in a context of shortening product life cycles. As Christopher (2013:12) notes: 'There are already situations arising where ... the life of a product on the market is less than the time it takes to design, procure, manufacture and distribute that same product! ... the means of achieving success in such markets is to accelerate movement through the supply chain.' The Amazon-type model, in which distribution is directly controlled by the retailer, is not, however, the only model. According to industry analysts, the majority of large companies outsource their logistics and supply chain functions to third party logistics (3PL) companies, with 86% of US Fortune 500 companies reported as doing so in 2012 (Armstrong and Associates, 2013). These 3PL companies, alongside shipping companies, rail companies, and some production companies, jostle for position with the retailers and ecommerce companies for control of their section of the supply chain, with many attempting to extend into neighbouring functions: by ousting their neighbours along the chain, by entering into strategic alliances with them, or bypassing them by using alternative routes and means. There are therefore a number of competing corporate players vying for control of logistics, but sharing the common goal of shortening the time to market as much as possible. We refer to this group collectively in this article as 'logistical capital'.

Labour in global supply chains

In this cut-throat race, what is happening to labour? Most consumers are dimly aware that the goods they have ordered online from retailers, with so little physical effort, do not just appear on their front doorsteps by magic. They may even be aware that they have been produced by means of an intricate global division of labour, involving the extraction of raw materials in one part of the world, their manufacture into products in a second and their assembly in a third (to take a rather simple example). The suicides of Foxconn workers in 2010 (China Labor Watch, 2010) brought public attention to the sweatshop conditions in which electronic goods marketed by companies like Apple, were assembled. More recently, there have also been campaigns highlighting poor conditions and low pay in Walmart, where Chinese-made goods are sold and where strikes were organised on 'Black Friday' in the USA in 2013 (Open Democracy, 2014), as well as television documentaries and articles exposing the tightly-monitored and pressurised work routines in Amazon warehouses (BBC Panorama, 2013; Head, 2014). What is less apparent is how the tasks carried out by these atomised and closely supervised workforces are interconnected and what processes guide the journey of the matter that passes so swiftly through their overworked hands.

Occasionally, against all the odds, a direct message gets through. In September 2012, Stephanie Wilson, a New York resident, bought a pair of rain boots from Saks

Fifth Avenue and found in the paper shopping bag a letter, headed 'Help! Help! Help!', written by a worker incarcerated in a Chinese prison where inmates were expected to work 13-hour daily shifts producing paper bags for up-market firms, including Saks (Greenhouse, 2014). A similar letter, also asking the finder to contact a human rights organisation, was found inside a package of Halloween decorations sold at Kmart in Oregon (Jacobs, 2013). Forced labour is an extreme example of exploitation. Workers who enter the labour market voluntarily and have acceded to the discipline of the workplace are unlikely to take such steps. For insights into their working lives we must rely on occasional journalistic accounts, reports from trade unions and NGOs seeking to improve their conditions and research carried out by social scientists. Qualitative research studies, too numerous to list here, have been carried out in a number of locations along the new global value chains, but tend, for understandable reasons linked with the difficulties of negotiating access to multiple locations, to be carried out on single sites, be they factories, warehouses or customer service call centres. In a few cases, research has been carried out in two or more adjacent links in the value chain, in order to gain an insight into the impact of restructuring on employment. Examples of these are the comparative case studies on the changing relationship between production and logistics in the food and drink and clothing industries carried out in the EC-funded WORKS¹ project (see, for instance, Huws et al, 2009; Flecker et al, 2007). These are rare windows into processes which are still poorly understood in their detail.

This article aims to add an additional window, drawing on research in progress into one transit point in global supply chains: the container port of Piraeus. This not only represents a key entry point from the east into Europe's markets; it also provides a particularly dramatic example of the impact of the privatisation of formerly public infrastructure in enabling private companies to seize control of supply routes. In this case, the company concerned is Cosco, a Chinese shipping company which was able to purchase 85% of the capacity of the container port in the 'fire-sale' of Greek public assets (Phillips, 2011) following the 2009 debt crisis.

The case study

The research which forms the basis of this article is being carried out collaboratively as part of a project led by the University of Western Sydney and funded by the Australian Research Council, from 2013 to 2016, entitled 'Logistics as global governance: labour, software and infrastructure along the New Silk Road'. Building on past research in the container ports of Shanghai, in China, Sydney, in Australia and Kolkata, in India (in the *Transit Labour*² project), it will investigate the container ports of Piraeus, in Greece and Valparaiso, in Chile, as well as revisiting Kolkata and Sydney, using a collaborative Research Platform approach.

A Research Platform is seen by Kanngieser, Neilson and Rossiter (2010) as 'a research tool for transcultural mapping'. Its use in the *Transit Labour* project is described in the following terms:

1 See <http://www.worksproject.be/>

2 See <http://transitlabour.asia/>

This project investigates changing material and conceptual connections between labour, mobility and subjectivity in the whirlwind of Asian capitalism. Moving across three cities – Shanghai (2010), Kolkata (2011) and Sydney (2012) – it employs a platform methodology to move beyond both the activities of the monastic scholar who writes theory and the sole researcher who does fieldwork. Each city becomes the site of a research platform that combines online and offline methods to gather researchers from across the world and bring them into collaborative relation with local participants through workshops, site visits, symposia, exhibitions, mailing lists, blogs and publishing. There is an emphasis on processes of inter-referencing between the three cities. The aim is to flee the data-mined, self-referential universe of social networking sites by building a multilingual environment for collaborative invention and the common production of knowledge.

This article is based on research carried out in Greece by Helen Kambouri and Pavlos Hatzopoulos, complemented by the first two of several site visits (in November, 2013 and July, 2014) by international researchers from Australia, Canada, Chile, India, Italy, Greece and the UK as well as by desk research carried out by Ursula Huws. During the research the team met with local informants, including representatives of local workers and community organisation. This was supplemented by a series of presentations from the research team, other local researchers and stakeholders. It therefore represents work in progress. These preliminary results will be followed by others in the future.

The context

Until 2009, the Greek port of Piraeus, located 10km south of the centre of Athens, was entirely run by the Piraeus Port Authority SA (OLP), a private company that was founded by the Greek state in 1999. Currently, the Greek state owns 74% of the company's shares. In 2009, a 35-year concession agreement of part of Piraeus terminal between the Greek state, OLP and Cosco, a Chinese, state-owned shipping, logistics and port management company took effect. From then on, under the terms of this agreement, the container port was divided into two parts: Pier I continues to operate under OLP, while Pier II and, from 2013, the newly-constructed Pier III, are operated by Piraeus Container Terminal SA - PCT, a Cosco subsidiary company operating under Greek law.

The concession agreement stipulated that OLP would retain the role of the sole competitor to Cosco's business at the container port; OLP retained the right to commercially utilise Pier I of the container terminal, a space that was practically constructed from scratch between 2009 and 2011, but cannot expand further since it is adjacent to the passenger section and Pier II of the port. Moreover the concession agreement stipulated that no other container facilities shall be constructed around a 200 kilometer radius near Piraeus by any other company.

As a result of the Cosco concession, Piraeus has swiftly become a major gateway for the distribution of Chinese goods across Europe and has stimulated further interest for Chinese investments in public infrastructures that are under privatisation in the context of the austerity and structural readjustment policies adopted by the Greek governments

following the debt crisis of 2009. As Captain Fu Cheng Qiu, the CEO of PCT, states: *No other country in Europe offers such potential. We believe that Piraeus can be the biggest port in the Mediterranean and one of the most important distribution centres because it is the gateway to the Balkans and southern Europe. (Smith, 2014).*

The port's growth has indeed been phenomenal in recent years. Piraeus ranks today as the third busiest container port in the Mediterranean (after Valencia and Algeciras in Spain). The port posted a 20% increase in traffic in 2013, on top of the massive 77% rise recorded in 2012 (the highest in the world). Piraeus Container Terminal (PCT), the local subsidiary of China's Cosco, handled 2.52 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) in Piraeus in 2013. When that is added to the 644,000 containers handled at Terminal I, operated by OLP, Piraeus handled a total of over 3.16 million TEUs in 2012 (Bellos, 2014).

The continuing expansion of the infrastructures within and outside the container port is expected to (and probably will) make it the busiest in the Mediterranean in the future. The new Pier III is set to expand in order to increase the port's capacity by more than 30%. A new freight centre is currently under construction in the Thriassio plain, linked with the port by an already-operational rail link. According to PCT management and the Greek government, these infrastructures will enable the port to grow still further and will result into Piraeus becoming a transit port for goods being transported via train and trucks to central and eastern Europe.

While the rise in productivity is dramatic in all piers, PCT piers enjoy a considerable advantage: 500,000 TEUs for PCT against 200,000 for OLP (Mylonas 2013). Data presented by the the Commercial Director of Cosco-PCT (Vamvakidis, 2013) also show a large increase of productivity in Pier II. The average moves per quay crane per hour according to the data presented have increased from 13.10 in 2010 to 19.45 in 2011 and 24.85 in 2012 – nearly doubling over the two year period since the granting of the concession, which comes with a port upgrade and the scaling up of other Chinese logistics interests in Greece.

The deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation of Piraeus Port

The growth of Piraeus port has been presented in Greek public discourse as one of the most - if not *the* most - important investments in the Greek economy since 2009. The Greek government has symbolically linked the Cosco concession to the expected recovery of the Greek economy and the effective management of the sovereign debt crisis through neoliberal austerity policies. On several occasions since 2009, state officials from both Greece and China have visited the PCT facilities in order to celebrate the concession as a mutually beneficial Greek-Chinese venture, bringing growth, employment and competitive advantages to both nations.

The limited research that has been conducted on the topic tends to be quite as state-centric as these government pronouncements and the dominant media reports. Most academic and policy analysis of the Cosco concession emphasises the threat that the Chinese investment in Piraeus may pose for European economies, including the threat of invasion of counterfeit Chinese goods (re)labelled 'European' after entering the Greek port (Van der Putten, 2014; Mihalakas, 2011).

This dominant state-centric discourse, however, obscures the current dynamics of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation pursued by global capital. On the one hand, Piraeus has become a hub within the global supply chain, especially by taking advantage of its geographical position. Piraeus is the first European port after the Suez canal in the East-West container shipping lanes and has the capacity to efficiently serve through-feeder ships ports around the Black Sea, including Turkey (Vamvakidis, 2014). The post-Cosco growth of the container terminals is thus directly connected to the rise of transit and transshipment cargo (which constitute more than 75% of its total traffic) and can be counterposed to the simultaneous decreasing volume of cargo that is driven by Greek imports and exports. The increased container traffic in Piraeus since 2009 can be almost entirely attributed to the expansion in the transit and transshipment of containers, which enter the port and are unloaded and then reloaded onto other ships, trucks, trains or airplanes for different destinations without ever entering into Greek territory.

There is no customs, control or taxation implemented by the Greek state in this movement of cargo. Piraeus' development into a transshipment hub, or China's gateway to Europe, took place without engaging with the messiness of the Greek economic crisis. The Piraeus container terminal port is expanding in capacity and in business in disconnection from the Greek economic space and its surrounding areas. In spatial terms the de-territorialised nature of Piraeus' growth can be observed in the sharp contrast between the booming container port itself and the surrounding environment, mainly the Perama municipality, which remains one of the poorest areas in Greece, with rising unemployment—mainly due to the closure of the ship repair industry (Hatzopoulos & Kambouri, 2014).

On the other hand, these de-territorialising dynamics are inherently linked to new forms of re-territorialisation. PCT's presence in the Piraeus container terminal is dependent on the presence of the Greek state and the multiple arrangements that have been struck between these two institutions, both formal and informal. The port's growth is also dependent on further public or public/private investments in the modernisation of infrastructures and the creation of transport corridors that can physically link the Piraeus hub to other hubs in global supply networks. Examples of this type of infrastructural project are the construction of the Piraeus-Thriassio rail link and the planned development of a new freight centre in Thriassio. The Greek state's authority over the port is also affected by the designation of Piraeus as a space under privatisation by the Troika³. In this sense, the production of the space of Piraeus port is constituted by the presence of multiple authorities and regulatory arrangements. Piraeus is far from exceptional in this respect, and it is necessary to acknowledge and investigate not just its particularities but also what it has in common with other logistical hubs around the world.

Impact on labour: disciplined precarisation

Since 2009, austerity policies and rising unemployment in Greece have contributed to the imposition of a new labour regime, which has completely undermined existing labour

³ The term 'Troika' refers to the trio of the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Commission who together laid down stringent conditions for lending to indebted European countries after the sovereign debt crisis.

relations, amending labour law, abolishing collective agreements and damaging existing labour time and payment rules. The constant threat of unemployment has rendered new forms of precarisation commonplace especially for the younger generations, who are employed on a short-term basis with indeterminate working times, threatened constantly with imminent unemployment. The precarisation of labour in Greece since the economic crisis is no longer limited to particular sectors and groups (such as domestic work, migrant work and creative industries) but is spreading to all sectors, including those in which labour was previously disciplined and unionised.

In this context, Piraeus port has been divided into two labour worlds: the OLP side, where older dock workers with permanent contracts and guaranteed overtime are employed; and the Cosco side, where younger dock workers are employed under extremely precarious conditions. The OLP labour world has been persistently diminishing since 2009, when the Cosco concession was introduced, and has been facing a constant threat of extinction. At the end of 2012, OLP was employing 1,206 workers, mostly dockers unionised along the lines of the Dockworkers' Union – the Port of Piraeus, was a founding member of the International Dockworkers Council (IDC). Labour relations on the OLP side are primarily structured via the collective agreement signed between the unions and OLP's management, buttressed by the implementation of international labour, health and safety standards on dock work. Under the austerity programmes followed by Greek governments, OLP has not been allowed to hire any new workers, while existing workers have suffered severe wage cuts that have been applied right across the Greek public sector (Gogos, 2014). At the same time, the entire company is currently under privatisation, along with several other commercial Greek ports, both large and small. At the time of writing, the privatisation process of OLP is in its second phase, in which the six investment groups – one of them being Cosco – who have submitted their expressions of interest are preparing to table their binding offers for buying the company.

In Piraeus Port's other labour world, Cosco's subsidiary, PCT, aided by the lack of stipulations on the regulation of labour relations in the concession agreement, has opted to completely disregard the existing arrangements in Piraeus Port. These were based on a labour pool system and the existing collective agreements between OLP and the existing dock worker labour unions that were in place. According to the president of the nationwide Federation of Port Employees (OMYLE), abandoning these agreements allowed PCT instantly to reduce labour costs by around 30% in comparison with those at OLP (Georgakopoulos, 2014).

In place of the strong unionisation, fixed labour contracts, well-paid work and overtime and strictly-observed health and security standards that were in place for Piraeus dockworkers employed by OLP, in 2009, the Cosco concession signalled the institution of a new labour regime largely based on the precarisation of labour combined with practices of strict discipline of the work force. Working conditions in the PCT terminal appear increasingly to be paradigmatic of the spread of these new forms of precarisation in all the sectors of the Greek economy.

The PCT labour regime could be described for the moment more as a 'black hole' than a clear-cut hell. Little is known about working conditions and labour relations, while gaining access to PCT's facilities is extremely difficult if not impossible.

The PCT container terminal is currently the only one in Europe where workers are not unionised; workers are practically prohibited by the company from forming any sort of collective representation. In the words of one fired ex-worker in the PCT terminal: *Unions and collective bargaining are strictly forbidden...There are no 'unionising forbidden' signs but people who speak up are fired and there is an atmosphere of sheer terror. (Batsoulis, 2014).*

Of the approximately 1,000 workers employed currently in the PCT terminals, only 261 were officially declared as PCT employees in 2013 (as evidenced by the 2013 PCT Annual Financial Statement)⁴. The remainder are hired through a complex web of subcontractors, orchestrated by a local logistics company, Diakinisis SA. The same ex-PCT worker described the situation in these words:

Between each employee and the company [PCT] there are two or three intermediaries. Out of one man's wages, two or three layers of contractors get their cut. (Batsoulis, 2014).

These employees have only individual job contracts, work on call, have no fixed schedules and are predominantly called to work in the piers with only a few hours notice. PCT dockworkers are generally low paid and do not get paid regular overtime. The president of OMYLE provides an illustration by referring to complaints received by his union from PCT workers who have been given fixed 35-euro wages for shifts that might last up to 16 hours (Georgakopoulos, 2014).

Everyday working conditions in the PCT docks remain largely an unmapped terrain, apart from a few glimpses provided by former workers who have decided to denounce the company. Some of these ex-workers have testified that labour and safety conditions in the PCT piers are not regularly inspected by local or national authorities. Two workers who were fired by the subcontractor for whom they worked in the PCT pier when they attempted to form a rudimentary union describe the extremely *ad hoc* character of working conditions and working arrangements in the PCT piers:

You were receiving an SMS to be at work in three hours. Nobody knew which shift he would work the next day. As for me, for nine months, I never worked on the basis of a work schedule. There was no schedule at all. (Batsoulis, 2014)

Finally, health and safety standards that are internationally applied to dock work have not been regularly observed in the PCT piers (Gogos 2014). This is illustrated by the same ex-PCT employee:

Every day, we were putting our own lives and our colleagues' lives in danger. My machine had problems, which I detailed in writing at the end of each shift ... The next day, we'd go back to work and find out nothing had been done about it. (Batsoulis, 2014).

There are additional indications that labour accidents in the docks have remained largely unreported to local authorities, with injured workers being transferred to hospitals in private vehicles and without notification of the proper authorities.

The PCT labour regime has been regularly denounced in public discourse by anti-government political forces, both on the left and the right, in predominantly

4 See http://www.pct.com.gr/pct_site/attachments/article/7/PCT%20ANNUAL%20FINANCIAL%20STATEMENTS%202013%20GR.PDF

sensationalist terms. Labour conditions in Piraeus port are most often characterised using terms such as the ‘Chinafication of Piraeus port’, or referring to the ‘Chinese labour standards’ or ‘medieval working conditions’ that have been imposed by Cosco in Piraeus (eg, Vatikiotis, 2014; Rombolis, 2013). These critiques have stressed the exceptional character of this labour regime, which is often seen as the herald of an ongoing complete invasion of foreign capital into a ravaged country, and the full exploitation of a devastated labour force that has been made possible through the successive austerity programs implemented by the Greek government in recent years under the auspices of the Troika.

Against these critical analyses, that are often based on an openly racialised political imaginary in relation to China’s positioning in global politics, it is important to resist the notion of the exceptionality of the labour regime in the PCT piers. Instead of relying on a stereotypical notion of a ‘Chinese model of labour’, it is necessary to contextualise the PCT labour regime in its broader context in the long-term processes related to the global restructuring of capital.

First, there is a significantly longer history of precarious forms of labour that pre-dated the Cosco concession and prefigured the recent transformations of the labour market in Greece. Since the 1980s, diverse forms of precarious work – informal, non-standard, atypical, non-declared, flexible, alternative, irregular, dependent work concealed as self-employment etc. – have appeared in Greece. More importantly, these have been the most rapidly-growing forms of labour, particularly in some sectors, such as services and agriculture. In this respect, the transformation of labour relations in Piraeus port marks the integration of dock work into a larger regime of precarity, a regime to which dock work was historically an exception, characterised by permanent or regular employment, a situation achieved after a long history of labour struggles and through the active unionisation of Greek dockworkers.

Second, the PCT labour regime must be placed in the specific historico-political context of the intensification of the Greek-European precarity regime since 2009, following the debt crisis, and the institutionalisation of precarity as the general condition of the labour regime in Greece. This intensification has been implemented in Greece through the increased involvement of the state in abolishing existing Fordist institutional arrangements and transferring most issues of regulation of the labour market to the aegis of the state. As a result, on top of massive unemployment (consistently over 20% from November 2011 onwards, and reaching 27.3% in April, 2014) labour rights that were in place before the economic crisis are now only enjoyed by workers in a few small pockets of business in the private sector of the economy (and usually, even then, through a ‘voluntary decision’ of the management of these businesses that is often represented in the media as philanthropy). This process is evident in how, for example, local residents that we interviewed in the neighboring municipalities of Drapetsona and Perama view workers in PCT as ‘privileged’ – at least in having a job at all, getting paid on time and earning salaries that are significantly above the minimum wage.

Third, the concept of precarity by itself is not sufficient to account for the particularities of the PCT labour regime. In many ways, precarity is too general a

concept for analysing the prevailing labour relations and the power exercised over the labouring bodies of workers in Piraeus port. As Neilson and Rossiter have argued, precarity cannot be 'bound down to any single set of experiences, social situations, geographical sites or temporal rhythms ... Played out over diverse and at times overlapping institutional fields, the sign and experience of precarity is multiplied across competing regimes of value' (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008: 58-59). Along these lines, we should primarily stress the distinctiveness of these dockworkers' precarious experiences of precarity. The precarity regime in Piraeus is based on a complex mixture of flexibility and strict discipline.

The flexibility of the dockworkers' working hours is combined with the permanent existence of three eight-hour shifts that keep the terminal operations functioning 24/7, with workers only knowing a few hours in advance for how many shifts they will be required to work (none, half, one or more). Discipline is exercised physically. Indeed, the need to exercise physical dominance over the bodies of the workers within the container terminal often seems to take precedence over other forms of power. Instead of relying on the forms of digital surveillance that are made possible through the software applications that manage all activities and movements of bodies and goods within the terminal, PCT seems to prefer to enforce forms of direct, physical surveillance and containment of workers' bodies. There are no established breaks within or between shifts, but use is made of 'nightclub-style bouncers' to check workers' movements within the terminal and also to 'prevent chatting amongst employees' (Batsoulis, 2014). Rules of fairness give way to personal favouritism. For instance, instead of tying the wage system to the measurement and reward of workers' productivity as this is recorded and analysed by the terminal operating system, it seems that PCT's reward system is often based on the perceived degrees of loyalty that workers show towards the management and the various subcontractors.

Labour struggles in Piraeus Port

In the period prior to the Cosco concession, several strikes were organised by the main OLP trade unions, with the main purpose of stopping the concession from proceeding or at least delaying it as much as possible (Rapti, 2007). Because of these long periods of strikes, in 2005, Piraeus Port was downgraded by several publications to the category of a 'regional port' and lost most of its trans-shipment business. By the end of 2006 traffic had dwindled to 400,000-500,000 TEUs, from the 1.6 million TEUs handled in 2004 (Kousta, 2010). When the concession agreement with Cosco was signed in November 2008, a new series of strikes started, culminating in a one-month strike in 2009 during which the port was brought to a standstill. The main demand of the OLP trade unions was to render the 'colonialist' concession invalid, arguing that OLP was a profitable company, which, if managed properly through the use of the most advanced technologies, could contribute significantly to the development of the Greek economy. The strike ended when the Single-Member Piraeus Court of First Instance ruled that the strike was both unlawful and abusive and the government offered labour unions an agreement according to which the state guaranteed secure jobs and a voluntary retirement scheme for the workers employed in OLP.

Since 2009, the OLP unions have tried to approach the newly recruited dock workers and push towards the creation of a labour union in the PCT container terminal, but their attempts have in most cases been unsuccessful. In interviews, the representatives of the OLP unions stressed the lack of communication with PCT workers and expressed their lack of knowledge about the specificities of labour relations on the other side of the port. The only reliable information has come from two dock workers who were fired by PCT because they demanded better working conditions (Batsoulis 2014). The secrecy surrounding wages and contract details was allegedly stipulated as part of the individual agreements workers made with PCT or the subcontracting companies that hired them. In 2014, a new series of strikes was called by OLP trade unions against the imminent privatisation of the company, while PCT workers seemed to remain outside these labour demands and struggles.

However, unexpectedly, on July 18, 2014, workers in the PCT container terminals organised their first ever strike, lasting for a day and a half (*Efimerida ton Sydakton*, 2014; Ekathimerini, 2014). Their main demands included: first, the signing of a collective labour agreement; second, the recognition of their employment as hard and hazardous to their health; third, an increase in daily pay rates and payment for working holidays, weekends and overtime; fourth, the abolition of 16-hour shifts and the establishment of breaks between shifts; fifth, the right to form a workers' committee to discuss labour issues; sixth, the recognition of labour accidents and the obligation to convey injured workers to hospital by ambulance rather than in private vehicles; seventh, the presence of five, rather than three, crew members in gangs; and eighth, the payment of back wages owed to them by various subcontractors.

Referring to the system of subcontracting its work force, PCT was able to deny direct responsibility for labour rights violations and delays in wage payments. Nevertheless, significant concessions were made. After the riot police arrived outside the port and the PCT management promised the strikers that PCT itself would meet their demands in the next ten days if the subcontractor who employed them was unable to do so, the strike was called off. PCT has pledged that workers who have already received training will gain recognition that their employment is hard and hazardous to health; that training will be provided for the rest of the dockworkers; that the Red Cross will be present to determine whether accidents require ambulances; that none of the strikers will be fired, and that the salaries that Diakinisis owed to its employees will be paid in full (Enet, 2014).

Future prospects for labour

Although in recent years the OLP trade unions have made concerted efforts to open channels of communication and express solidarity with the workers of the PCT container terminals, labour struggles in Piraeus port remain largely disjointed. The labour force in Piraeus has become characterised by fragmentation and hierarchy, segmented into precarious and non-precarious dockworkers. This has contributed to the prolongation of existing divisions in the port. Hierarchisation is also reflected in the different forms of labour struggle and the diverse labour demands that have emerged in the two sides of the port. The OLP labour mobilisations have primarily addressed the Greek state, demanding

respect for recognised labour rights and attempting to salvage Fordist labour relations in the port, while the PCT workers' mobilisation have targeted foreign private capital, demanding basic labour rights that are no longer guaranteed for all workers in Europe.

The existing difficulties in aligning the labour struggles of Piraeus Port workers become even more acute when our analysis moves beyond the national horizon and attempts to contextualise them within processes of exploitation along the global supply chain. This exploratory case study of labour relations in Piraeus port raises some crucial broader questions about the tactics and strategies of labour struggles along global circuits of production and distribution. How can these struggles, although tied to local and national experiences and institutional arrangements, move beyond these territorial dynamics and acquire a transnational character? The commonalities characterising the imposition of new labour regimes in the rising nodes of the global supply chain across Europe have been highlighted by several recent studies (*Ta Paidia tis Galarias*, 2013 and Andrijasevic & Saccheto, 2013). These analyses have helped us to identify common threads that link the labour relations and working conditions in production with those in logistics: for instance by comparing the working conditions in IT manufacturing industries created in central and eastern Europe by Chinese companies such as Foxconn and Chung Hong Electronics with the hardships facing workers in Piraeus Port.

New plans are now coming to fruition, to connect Piraeus Port to Kutna Hora in the Czech Republic, where some of these factories are located, via a new railway line. Such developments raise further questions regarding the possibilities of linking labour struggles across the new transport routes being opened by logistical capital and makes them even more pressing. This infrastructural project (connecting the port and the rail link) was initially conceived for the transportation of Hewlett Packard products from the port of Shenzhen in China to Kutna Hora via Piraeus. The opening of this new multimodal transport route embodies at the same time both the power and the elusiveness of logistical capital. While its elusiveness enables it to evade contemporary forms of labour mobilisation, its scale and power give it a capacity for domination (including in its relationship with the local state) that demonstrates the need for urgency in inventing transnational forms of organisation that can adapt and respond to the de-territorialising and re-territorialising mutations of logistical capital.

Conclusions

This case study raises a number of issues deserving of further investigation.

First, it illustrates very clearly the speed with which supply chains are being consolidated and restructured around the globe, the complicated negotiations between international capital and national states that takes place to put the necessary infrastructure in place and the readiness of companies to leap in to take advantage of opportunities thrown up by political circumstances. Political, economic and geographical factors all converge to shape the destiny of any particular hub in these supply chains, shaped by the intersecting interests of a range of powerful actors, many of whom are geographically remote from the site in question.

In this case, the actors directly or indirectly involved in shaping the future of Piraeus Port include, at a supranational level, the International Monetary Fund (IMF),

the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Commission (EC): the Troika whose draconian terms attached to the loans made to the Greek Government created the imperative to sell off its public assets, including the Port, and reduce the wages and employment rights of Greek public sector workers. At a national level, they include not only Greece, but also the Chinese state, with its close links to Cosco and its interest in improving access to the rest of Europe as a market for Chinese exports, as well as central and eastern Europe as a site for manufacturing for other Chinese-owned companies. Corporate interests in the development include not just Cosco itself, and its local subcontractors, but also Hewlett Packard, whose need to transport goods from China made it the first major customer for the transit route through Piraeus, as well as other international companies, China-based or not, that will use it in the future.

This complex network of intermeshed interests makes it difficult to pin the blame on any single specific actor for the consequences of these developments for dock labour in Piraeus. This points to a general challenge in the analysis of labour in global supply chains: the difficulty of disentangling the impact of historically and spatially specific impacts (such as, in this case, the catastrophic impact on the pay, conditions and job security of Greek workers resulting from the impact of the 2009 debt crisis) from those arising from global economic forces – the general impacts on labour of value chain consolidation and restructuring which may include intensification and speed-up of work, precarisation of working conditions and downward pressure on wages.

What is clear is that there is an urgent need for further research that goes beyond individual case studies (valuable though these are) to investigate the changing conditions of logistical labour right along the supply chain and, in the process, begin to identify which issues are capable of being addressed locally, and which will require intervention at a broader geographical and political level.

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