The present paper aims to shed light on how militant unionism positions itself towards features of active employment policies such as the two big training programs launched by the PIRAEUS CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY (PCCI) in 2013 and 2015. Our main objective is to examine the engagement of the local militant trade unions in regard with the program’s objectives, implementation and outcomes. Building on union revitalization approaches (Frege and Kelly, 2003) we attempt to explore the potential regenerating aspects of a proactive and strategic union orientation towards vocational training. For this end, we analyze a body of material stemming from interviews mainly with unionists and participants, group interviews with career counselors, field observations, and evaluation reports generated by the Athens university of Economics and Business. Finally we present some raw data concerning the ongoing program of 2015.

The training program, the target-group and some preliminary findings

The counseling, training and certification programs under scrutiny have been implemented in two waves from a consortium of training providers under the auspices
of Piraeus Chambers of Commerce and Industry. The first wave in 2013 was addressed to 1500 unemployed and threatened by unemployment of the industrial zone of Piraeus, while the second wave in 2015 was addressed to 2500 employees, threatened by unemployment and self-employed mainly of the industrial zones of Piraeus and Thriasion.

The first program has been funded by the Operational Program of NSRF 2007-2013 "National Contingency Reserve" and the second by the Operational Program Development of Human Resources 2007-2013. During the first program 500 unemployed and 1,000 employees threatened by unemployment, engaged in the industrial sectors of the Piraeus regional unit, were enabled:

a. To be trained in nine (9) specialist areas,
b. To receive advisory support and
c. To attest their knowledge and skills by TÜV Hellas SA.

1,495 recipients have successfully completed the training, which lasted 240 hours. 112 hours of these were theoretical specialized training in a specialty from a list of nine categories, and training on common ("horizontal") courses, while 28 hours were practical training. The budget of the above Operation, amounts to 7,76 millions € and is financed by European Social Fund (ESF).

During the second program -which is still ongoing- 2500 employed, self-employed and threatened by unemployment are trained in eleven (11) specialties. They will also receive advisory support and they will attest their knowledge. The program entails 250 hours of training, with practical training comprising 50 hours.

An interesting point stemming from the above descriptions is that there are some major differences which we suggest that they strongly relate to the union involvement in the program. We sum up those differences as it follows:
1. The training hours in practical training have been doubled.

2. The training benefit has been increased.

3. Two more specialties have been included after the extensive discussions between unions, the Chamber and the accreditation body.

4. The target area has been substantially expanded.

Another obvious difference derives from the target group’s employment status, but this has to do with the funding prerogatives of the second program.

For the purposes of the present paper we created a database consisted of 2215 beneficiaries who participated in the second program. According to the data that we have collected and processed so far, the geographical composition of the target population is as it follows:

![Graph 1](image_url)

**Geographical Dispersion**

- West Attica: 27%
- Piraeus: 18%
- West Piraeus: 42%
- Other: 13%

Source: KEK ATTIKIS SA
As it is explicitly indicated the target population lives in municipalities that have been severely hit by the economic crisis and the previous industrial restructuring. Almost a half of the beneficiaries reside in Piraeus and its neighboring municipalities of West Piraeus. Almost one third comes from West Attica which comprises heavily de-industrialized areas as Eleusis and Aspropyrgos (among other companies under restructuring and downsizing the most striking cases is that of Hellenic Halyvourgia and Halyvourgiki). In this context, it hardly surprises us that the average income of the target group is impressively below the national average (Census 2011).

Elaborating on the age composition of the beneficiaries, two dominant age groups stand out: 30-45 and 46-60. As many of my informants have mentioned, the shipbuilding industry and metal industry in general, appeals less and less as a career pathway to the young people of the targeted areas. However, as it is also clear, the professions of the metal industry are not an issue concerning basically elder workers who are close to pension. In fact, middle age workers are the most interested in getting engaged with such programs. According to the evaluation reports of Athens University of Economics and Business, during the first program (2013) the age distribution has not been substantially different. Another interesting finding of the first program is that the younger trainees had a better performance during the certification compared with the older trainees.
As it is expected the target group is male dominated, as those heavy industries of Piraeus and West Attica, occupy mainly male workers. Another important dimension regarded the target group composition is the unionization rates. According to a diagnosis of needs that is conducted during the counseling process, we witnessed a very high unionization rate among the trainees. The majority of the trainees (more than 70%) claimed to be member of a trade union. Even in terms of proneness towards an active engagement with union’s activities, 40% of the interviewees stated that they like participating in such activities either frequently or very frequently.
Once again, the findings of the evaluation reports of the Athens University of Economics and Business reaffirm those tendencies recorded during the second program. As Graph 4 indicates, among the first 5 reasons for attending the program, is that the union recommended the beneficiary to do so:
This propensity of the majority of the beneficiaries towards unionism could be attributed to the following reasons:

- The whole procedure is conducted and surveilled by the trade unions of the industrial sectors of the target areas. As stressed below SMAS has been involved in multiple ways in the preparatory decision processes, design and delivery of the programs. It should be noticed though that this implication would be marginal or would not exist at all, if the unions maintained loose ties with their members or if they were outnumbered as the majority of the Greek trade unions.

- As the international literature shows, the unionized workers generally spend a greater average amount of time in employment-related learning than non-unionized workers and hence ‘organised workers by definition have the greatest power to produce and apply their own knowledge’

[7]
Finally, in regard with the ethnicity, 10% of the beneficiaries are immigrants and 90% are Greeks. This figure shows that the migrant workforce of Piraeus and West Attica is not underrepresented in the total population of trainees. This in turn draws our attention to the trade unions that mobilize the workers in order to apply and get involved in the training program. The union with the highest rates of membership (mainly from Piraeus, but also from other areas of Attica) and with the most intensive engagement in the aforementioned programs is the Syndicate of Metalworkers of Attika and Shipbuilding industry of Greece (SMAS). Additionally there are other unions that encourage their members to take actively part to the program, such as the newly founded union of operators (with many members from West Attica and also many workers of COSCO), or the Labor Center of Eleusis and Thriasion which is a locally based second-level trade union. However, SMAS has been engaged in both programs of 2013 and 2015 and represents the majority of the trainees.

**Syndicate of Metalworkers of Attika and Shipbuilding industry of Greece (SMAS): community unionism, solidarity and class politics**

The Union of Metalworkers of Attica and Shipbuilding industry of Greece (SMAS) the biggest metalworkers’ union in Greece, is the successor of the Syndicate of Metalworkers of Piraeus and Islands, after the merge of the latter with other smaller unions which represented either metalworkers of neighboring areas, or professions such as metal welders, ship carpenters, electricians etc. Apart from having its headquarters at Piraeus SMAS is directly involved in the zone’s workplaces as it operates its premises (the so-called Paragka) in Perama shipyards, the zone’s core. As stated by Spyridakis (2013: 138-139) the union constitutes an additional social space...
where a relentless flow of information is taking place regarding ‘job-hunting’, work-related issues, political developments, and monitoring of employment conditions. Far from being uncontested the union’s radical politics shape its identity along with its numerous strike events, its class enmity against the ship-owners and its multiple controls over the contractors’ practices within the zone (Photo 1).

**Photo 1** The Metalworker Memorial at Perama Zone

![Photo 1](source: Rizospastis (2009)

The question raised here is quite obvious: how this militant profile co-exists with a positive reception of a state and EU funded training program, which seems to be integral part of an active employment policy?

A first argument is that training here is -at least initially- approached as a strategic instrument for strengthening the union ties with the precarious workers of Piraeus and neighboring areas. At a second level, this pro-learning attitude should be also
understood as a response to a critique on unions’ inefficiency expressed both internally (from unions’ members) and externally (from unions’ opponents). In a context of corroded levels of trust towards Greek unionism (Table 1), commented by various scholars even before the economic crisis (Kouzis, 2007), the unions’ support of an educational program which results in recognition of professional skills may entail a more strategic direction.

Table 1 Levels of trust towards institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No trust to trade unions</td>
<td>44% (among unionized employees)</td>
<td>65% (among unionized employees)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research papers INE/GSEE, VPRC, 2008-2010.

A final argument that is only tentatively commented here is that a large scale training and certification program such as this one constitutes rather an exception to the rule of fragmented small scale training programs funded by the ministry of labour and the EU.

The unions’ perspective

Our preliminary findings show that SMAS and its members received multifaceted gains through their participation in those training courses. These gains could be summarized as follows:

1. Unions gained membership through the delivery of information, administrative support and services related to the applications.

2. Unions gained prestige among its constituents through the effective
bargaining with the interesting parties (mainly the PCCI) which resulted in higher compensation for the beneficiaries.

3. Union members gained certificates, training benefits (up to 1750€ gross) and counseling. Moreover, more than a third of the certified participants in the first program found a job; even in the labor market abroad (PCCI 2015).

The above gains should be assessed in the context of a fragmented national and local labour market which has been undergone tremendous shifts and backdrops. Austerity measures imposed by Greek governments, among other impacts, have led to violent dislocations in the industrial relations field (Kretsos, 2011: 268). The undermining of collective bargaining coupled with a staggering unemployment rate from 8% in 2007 to 27% in 2013 (Pouliakas, 2013) had a deep negative impact on the unions’ resources. Without underestimating the unions’ responsibilities for the widening representation gap between unions and the working class, the labor reforms of the last 6 years have been a decisive factor of decomposition and dismantling of any organized and structured process in the interaction between capital and labor obviously at the expense of the latter.

No matter how harsh are the manifestations of such phenomena, the Greek hostile anti-labour environment is not a national exceptional case. The same applies to the internal situation of the union movement. Declining union density, de-collectivization, institutional and economic losses are some of the symptoms that characterize the international union movement in the beginning of the 21st century. Those adversities are also reflected on the academic debates over the contemporary union revitalization prospects at the European and international level. Many scholars have pointed that despite the negative balance of power in the globalization context, unions can still
invent strategies that under certain circumstances lead the trade union movement to membership, economic, political, and institutional gains (Behrens et al. 2004). Although a vast bibliography on a variety of revitalization strategies has been developed, as Findlay and Warhurst (2011) have argued ‘the role of unions in supporting members’ skills and learning has rarely featured in analysis of union revitalization’. While the renewal prospects of a strategic trade union engagement in vocational training have been downplayed, the study of those prospects should not ignore the potential risks of such instrumental uses and misuses of active employment policies.

A first risk concerns the identification of the pro-learning union propensity as an exclusively service oriented union model. The critique against this model of unionism made by Stoud and Fairbrother is more than relevant here: ‘[the fact that] trade unions organise primarily as service organisations… means that leaders define the concerns of members in restricted and narrowly work related ways… thus, union leaderships often are not in a position to articulate the interests of members who clearly worry about the future, but who struggle to define their learning needs precisely and in a focused way.’ (2008). The union involvement should be reflective, pro-active and elaborated resonating the union’s broader aims and objectives, if it is not to result in a single justification of the political agendas of active employment policies with short term impact on the workforce. In a similar vein Mahnkopf (1991) describes how the progressive “skill-orientated strategy” (as opposed to a regressive and defensive price-oriented strategy) by trade unions challenges employers’ prerogatives with regard to training; enhances bargaining positions; and combats deskillling.

According to our field survey, the union engagement in the training programs of Piraeus and Thriasion industrial zones became part of a broader revitalization strategy
of the local trade unions. The most critical intervention of the SMAS union relates to
the multiple pressures towards the government, the ministry of labor, and the political
parties while aiming at the program’s funding for as much as possible beneficiaries. In
a context of austerity, mass unemployment, and dramatic cuts in unemployment
benefits and social welfare, the allocation of funding for vocational training has been
a rather complicated issue. The governments’ preference on small scale trainings,
addressed to vulnerable groups and youth, such as the Voucher system, or the local
initiatives against unemployment and poverty such as TOPEKO and TOPSA,
dermines the funding potential of a broader, large scale, industry-based and
certification-oriented program. Nevertheless, the coordinated initiatives of PCCI and
the unions, allowed PCCI to launch the two training programs under examination.

The union’s class discourse although followed by a persisting distrust towards the
government, the Chamber and the training providers, has not hampered its capacity to
negotiate and partly influence the decisions made before and during the program’s
implementation. There were “hot debates” among the interested parties i.e. the unions,
the Chamber, the Ministry, the training providers and the certification body on issues
that we could summarize as follows:

- The flat-rates of the training benefits.
- The professions which would be certified at the end of the process.
- The number of the trainees and the timeline of the programs.
- The eligibility and assessment criteria of the candidates’ selection.
- The rights and obligations of the beneficiaries.

SMAS has been actively raised the above issues. Moreover it was involved in the
administrative preparation of the training courses. The great majority of the trainees
stated that they received the relevant information from the union which has also
helped them to fill in and submit the applications. Its contribution in the smooth operation of the program has been continued throughout the training and counseling process, in two critical fields:

- The re-establishment of a proper communication with those beneficiaries whose tracks were lost due to several reasons (e.g. professional travel abroad)
- The visiting of the training premises by unionists and the re-alignment of the members with the program’s qualitative requirements.

According to the evaluation reports delivered by the Athens University of Economics and Business in regard with the completed program of 2013, the added value of this program entails a) the collaboration between the Chamber and the trade unions, b) the pioneering established linkage between training and counseling of individuals on the one hand and certification of technical skills on the other, c) a positive shift on the individual’s attitude towards vocational training, d) the awareness raising that has been realized regarding the workforce of Piraeus (AUEB, 2015: 10-11). The reports show that there were also dominant positive perceptions on issues related to the utility of the program (Graph 5), the quality of the training (Graph 6) and the utility of the certification (Graph 7).
Graph 5

How do you assess the utility of the program regarding your professional expertise

Source: AUEB (2015, 21)

Graph 6

Quality Assessment by the beneficiaries (2013)

Source: AUEB (2015, 24)
The intensive character of unions’ involvement in the program’s design and implementation was not lacking negative aspects too. Many of the beneficiaries were developing a clientilist attitude by asking a privileged treatment by the program’s facilitators (trainers and administrative staff) mostly in regard with issues like absence from the lessons and selection of class according to excessive individual desires. The big picture though is that the interaction among SMAS, trainees and training providers has been fruitful and enriched the quality of the program mainly by maintaining the members’ commitment to it.

Concluding Remarks

Through a thorough examination of two big scale training programs implemented by the Piraeus Chambers of Commerce in 2013 and 2015, we attempt to assess the trade union involvement in regard with the discussion on union revitalization.
strategies. The importance of the aforementioned programs for the local working class is underpinned on the analysis of the local labor market conditions which manifests endogenous liminality and fragmentation. The main material was collected through field research, Chamber’s material, training material, union announcements, interviews with beneficiaries, counselors, unionists, Chamber executives and trainers. My active involvement as a counselor and administrative staff of the training provider (KEK ATTIKIS SA) gave me access to records and material which was treated in line with the ethics of the involved institutions.

Three main gains derive from the programs’ implementation in tandem with the objectives of the unions (SMAS and local unions) and their members:

1. Membership gains.
2. Improvements at the representation level (the unions render themselves more prestigious).
3. Union members gained certificates, training benefits (up to 1750€ gross) and counseling. Moreover, More than a third of the certified participants in the first program found a job even in the labor market abroad (PCCI 2015).
4. Institutional gains: The quality of the training and certification has been improved in the case of the second program.

The above outcomes support the arguments made by scholars of the European and international union movement on the critical link between unions’ active engagement in upskilling processes and union renewal. Certain preconditions should not be overlooked though, mainly as far as it concerns the union strategy and politics and how these are interwoven with the union’s stance towards training. A more detailed analysis of the second training program (2015) may enhance further the credibility of the aforementioned preliminary findings.
References:


PCCI (2015) ‘Vocational training program for the certification of technical competence by ISO/IEC 17024’, Piraeus: Piraeus Chamber of Commerce and
Industry.

