

**Anna Paraskevopoulou** Women Tobacco Workers  
in the Interwar period  
in Greece

**ABSTRACT**

This article discusses the contribution of women tobacco workers to the Greek labour movement during the interwar years, a period characterised by significant socio-economic changes. Challenges such as the influx of refugees from Asia Minor who constituted cheap labour in 1922, the introduction of modernised methods of processing tobacco, and the gradual decline in demand for high-quality tobacco affected industrial relations at the time. Consequently, the period was characterised by a strong response from the tobacco labour unions, with a dynamic presence of women who fought for better work conditions, equal pay, and rights at work. The article concludes that more research on individual biographies is needed to better understand how women's activism evolved during this period and its role in the development of the women's movement.

**KEYWORDS**

Tobacco workers  
Gender relations  
Women refugees  
The Greek labour movement

## INTRODUCTION

The tobacco industry in Greece dates back several centuries and its history is deeply intertwined with the economy, society and culture of the country. Tobacco was first introduced in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans considered tobacco a lucrative source of revenue, and its production and distribution were promoted and carefully regulated. The northern region of Greece provided a favourable climate and soil conditions that facilitated the cultivation and growth of the best quality tobacco, called Oriental, unique in terms of its flavour and other characteristics. Tobacco cultivation and processing was the predominant economic activity of the area (Stergiopoulos, 2016). After the area was annexed to Greece at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, towns such as Thessaloniki, Xanthi, Kavala, Drama, Serres, Volos and Agrinio continued to prosper from trading their high-quality product. Cigarette manufacturing in Greece also grew in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as several Greek tobacco companies were established, leading to the production of both domestic and internationally popular cigarette brands.

The tobacco industry provided employment to thousands of people in all stages of work: growers and agricultural labour, skilled tobacco workers in warehouses, intermediaries (brokers), merchants and factory owners. The processing of the tobacco leaves took place in specially designed buildings called *kapnathikes* (tobacco storerooms) and *kapnomagaza* (tobacco warehouses) which were built in the manufacturing towns. Here, skilled labour was employed, often consisting of people who were already involved in the agricultural stage of tobacco cultivation – its growth and the initial processing of tobacco leaves (Labrianidis, 1987).

It was in these working spaces that the tobacco workers' movement was born. The formation of La Federation Socialista (the Socialist Federation) – established in Thessaloniki in 1909 by workers of various ethnic groups and representing different sectors – signalled the beginning of an organised effort (Starr, 1945) for workers to demand rights at work and improve their work conditions. From then onwards, the influence of La Federation contributed to the development of a significant tobacco workers' movement, leading to the large-scale strikes that took place throughout the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s (Aggeli, 2007). The tobacco workers played a pivotal role in the history of industrial relations and the labour movement in Greece, and for this reason it is vital that the study of the economic history of tobacco production should record the tobacco workers' contribution. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognise that mobilisation and activism among tobacco workers originated during the period of Ottoman Empire rule, as documented by Nacar's research (2014), and despite the geopolitical changes and rearrangements of borders, worker activism continued nearly uninterrupted. Notable here is the work of Papastefanaki and Kabadayi (2020), who have looked at labour social history in both Greece and Turkey.

Women played a vital role both in the tobacco industry as workers and in the tobacco labour movement as activists. It can be argued that their struggles for better working conditions, fair wages and improved rights within the industry were crucial to the broader labour and women's rights movements. Many involved, being members of the communist party, considered their resistance and contribution to the tobacco workers movement as a double effort to liberate themselves from their oppression as workers and their oppression as women (Mpakali, 2014). Directly and indirectly, the struggles of women tobacco workers in

Greece contributed to better pay and work conditions, collective bargaining, health and safety and improved labour rights. At the same time, they challenged the stigma of paid work for women and the prevailing gender norms that kept women in "hidden" employment (Hatton, 2017), such as agricultural and domestic work, with no opportunity to organise and demand better working and living conditions for themselves. It is essential to recognise their effort to fight for gender equality and worker's rights as part of the continuous work of fighting gender discrimination.

The history of the tobacco labour movement in Greece is often divided into three broad historical phases (Labrianidis, 1987): before the First World War, the interwar years, and the period after the Second World War. These phases represent different socio-economic conditions nationally and internationally: the economic conditions – that is, the demand and supply of tobacco – and the efforts of the Greek state to modernise its economy. This paper focuses on the interwar years because it was during this period that the tobacco workers movement and the events that followed were most intense. After the end of the Greek-Turkish War (1919-1922), a large exchange of populations took place between Greece and Turkey as part of the Lausanne Treaty (1922), resulting in thousands of refugees arriving in Greece in need of a job and other necessities. The tobacco industry was one of the main employers for both men and women refugees. This large pool of mainly cheap labour, consisting of many women and children, resulted in the expansion of the sector (Christodoulaki, 2001), but also in the reduction of employment rights and wages and the general weakening of the workers' collective bargaining power (Dagkas, 2007). The new situation led to further worker organising and to a stronger tobacco workers' union movement as every tobacco warehouse had a union representative.

The interwar period is additionally interesting because the women's rights movement was growing on the international stage, and this was a time of intense activism and advocacy for gender equality and women's suffrage. Greece was no exception as women workers organised in labour unions and fought for equal rights. Nevertheless, to borrow Canning's term "mutual distancing" (Canning, 1992: 740), there is limited literature on women's contribution to the Greek labour movement and, consequently, a considerable number of historical publications concerning women's labour, daily experiences and political activism developed somewhat independently from the main body of historical social science (Canning, 1992). The purpose of this paper is to render women more visible in Greek labour history by examining their roles as workers and political activists – roles that often merged.

The paper contributes to this discussion by considering both class and gender as integral parts of women's political activism. Class remains a crucial analytical framework for labour historians. However, this framework must be broadened to enable the examination of how women and men transition between various positions on gender, race, ethnicity and other forms of difference (Davis, 2011; Frader, 1998). Therefore, feminist scholarship has proposed methods to revive the concept of class by highlighting how it encompasses more than just a structural position within the economy and society. Instead, class is viewed as a historical, political and cultural construct – a shaped social entity. Class interests are shaped not solely on economic and material grounds, but also on the foundation of verbal assertions and appeals to symbolic significance which carry inherently political implications, such as the struggle for better work conditions and the achievement of equal rights and social justice. Moreover, the gendered understanding of class, which stems from economic

relationships and structures, has a significant impact on shaping the state and commercial and political institutions as physical and mental spaces for the development of political activism.

Judith Butler's conceptualisation of precarity in connection with the "performative power of assembly" is also relevant here, as – albeit referring to the contemporary neoliberal system – she suggests that human vulnerability, deprivation and dispossession are frequently influenced by political and economic factors that are outside our control. In response, the author advocates for resistance against "induced precarity and its accelerations" (Butler, 2015: 16). One strategy to accomplish this is to bring attention to these issues as individuals come together to demonstrate in public areas (Butler, 2011) and the article, as we shall see in the following sections, explores how women tobacco workers used their own bodies to protest against bad conditions of work and pay. By doing so, their participation in public demonstrations represented resistance, indicating a significant shift in the perception of women who were traditionally expected to confine themselves to private spheres.

## METHOD

Women tobacco workers were therefore at the forefront of early women's rights movements in Greece, engaging in various forms of activism, including syndicalism and participation in demonstrations and strikes (Liakos, 1993). Many experienced the harsh realities of the time, and some paid for these struggles with their lives. Using historical sociology, and based on a range of secondary sources, this paper creates a narrative of women tobacco workers' contribution to the labour movement in Greece, their solidarity and collective action, and their empowerment in Greece. The intersection of history and sociology allows the examination of social phenomena, recognising how social transformations take shape and influence social outcomes (Calhoun, 1998). In this case, historical sociology helps to better understand the role of agency of women tobacco workers within the overall economic transformations that were taking place at the time in Greece, paving the way for wider female participation in the labour market and organised labour movement.

More specifically, the paper focuses on the short stories of four women tobacco workers who fell victim to state violence and lost their lives in demonstrations and strike action. Currently, detailed information about the private and political lives of the four women tobacco workers is limited. The few facts that exist about their membership of political parties, their activism and their lives as workers, mothers, spouses or daughters were circulated in the media. Despite the restricted information available, it remains crucial to unify these four accounts and illustrate that women during the interwar period were not passive or restricted to private realms. They were not merely "hidden labour", but rather active participants who challenged the norms and customs of the era. They organised themselves into trade unions, voiced their political convictions, and made ultimate sacrifices for their principles.

Many more women workers during this period were injured by various acts of police violence; these four stories are just a sample of women workers' experiences. An intersectional approach has been considered in this paper, which refers to the recognition of how various forms of social identity and categorisations intersect and influence the experiences and struggles of workers

within the labour movement. On this occasion, gender, class and refugee status were dimensions of identity that shaped women's activism in the tobacco labour movement, acknowledging that workers faced multiple layers of discrimination and oppression based on these intersecting identities.

The selection of the four stories was based on three main criteria. First, the stories represented a major event in the tobacco workers' labour history in the 1920s. Second, was the intersectional elements of their story. The third criterion was based on the period of these women's stories, being during the interwar period.

## THE FOUR NARRATIVES

### *The story of Maria Housiadou (1924), Kavala*

Kavala is one of the main port towns in north-east Greece. It has a rich history of tobacco production, which played a significant role in shaping the city's heritage and economy. It became known for its skilled tobacco workers and modernised processing facilities in which tobacco leaves were processed and then shipped from the port for domestic and international distribution. In 1922 there were tensions both in Kavala and the neighbouring Xanthi (an equally important centre of tobacco production), and workers went on strike demanding better wages, the reduction of the 12-hour work day, and a ban on the export of unprocessed tobacco leaves, which lowered the quality of the product and threaten workers with deskilling. The export of unprocessed tobacco leaves was prohibited by a law (2869) which was passed in 1919. However, as unprocessed tobacco lowered the cost of exports and therefore was deemed profitable by the merchants, a loophole was found in the interpretation of the law which led to continuous conflict between the unions and the merchants (Carmona-Zabala, 2018). The threat of lowering the quality of tobacco also meant the weakening of the tobacco labour movement, and this is another reason that workers were strongly opposed to it. In 1924, workers found that unprocessed tobacco was loaded onto vessels in the port and took decisive action by calling a general strike and demonstration in Kavala. The strike was supported by the communist party (Mpakali, 2014) and also demanded better pay, shorter working hours and better work conditions. Maria was a member of the communist party and a dynamic member of the tobacco workers' labour movement. On the day, she took part in the demonstrations. The police took action against the workers: shots were fired and Maria was killed. There is not much known about her life and work, but it certainly took a lot of courage for her to be such a dynamic and front-line member of the union. Her memory is honoured as one of the first female victims in the tobacco workers' struggle.

### *The story of Vasiliki Georgatzeli (1926)*

A little more is known about Vasiliki's life, according to the doctoral research conducted by Aggeli (2007). Vasiliki was born in Asia Minor and came to Greece with her family as a refugee during the exchange of populations. She lived and worked in the town of Agrinio, another important town in the history of the tobacco industry. Vasiliki found work in a tobacco factory. Tobacco processing was hard work, unhealthy and for low wages. In 1926, the exchange rates changed and increased the profits of tobacco merchants. Tobacco workers went into strike to demand better wages and work conditions. Like Maria, Vasiliki was also

a dynamic member of the union, and during the strike she was part of a group guarding the demonstrations and actions. During the main demonstration, the police became heavy-handed with the strikers, using live bullets that killed four people. Amongst them was Vasiliki, who was shot in the chest. She was 29 years old, pregnant with a child and mother of two. Her sacrifice is memorable. Mpada's (2018) notable work on the memories of Agrinio's women tobacco workers provides the following quote:

*...our union was strong. The bosses brought in tonga [a new machinery for processing tobacco] and for this reason they employed only women, our men were left without a job...Men used to earn 90 drachma and women 37, why shouldn't they employ us in tonga?...We went to many strikes over this and in 1926, when they killed Georgatzeli, a woman tobacco worker, pregnant...the police killed her...no shame, pregnant...[killed her together] with two more [strikers]...they did not even let us the funeral to take place in the St Demetrios church. (Mpada, 2018: 86)*

The local news reported that the funeral became a demonstration which many locals attended. Despite the loss of life, the strike was successful because many of the demands were met. Today, there is a plaque that commemorates the death of Georgatzeli and the other strikers.

#### *The story of Anastasia Karanikola (1936)*

The strike and demonstration of May 1936 is considered to be one of the important historical moments in Greek industrial relations. Large-scale strike action took place all over Greece, starting on 29 April. According to the *Rizospastis* newspaper (2006), 12 000 tobacco workers, following their union's decision, went on strike. Of these, 70% were women. The main reason was working conditions; however, the widespread unrest also shows that the action was part of a wider class struggle arising from the economic crisis and other socio-political changes. The mobilization of tobacco employees unified workers from other sectors who showed solidarity, leading to a united uprising against the ruling Metaxas regime and demanding its fall. The Metaxas government responded harshly, and the police used brutal tactics against the demonstrating, killing many. An image of a mother crying over the dead body of her son, Tasos Toutsis, is said to have inspired the famous Greek poet Giannis Ritsos to create his work *Epitaphios*. This is another aspect of women's experiences of the class struggles that took place in Greece during the interwar period.

Anastasia was shot dead in these demonstrations. As in the case of Maria, there is little information about the life and work of Anastasia; her death was commemorated with a hand-written note saying 'this is where Anastasia was murdered'. Anastasia was a member of the communist party and an active member of the tobacco workers' movement. Her death signifies the contribution and sacrifice women made towards the class struggles of the time.

#### *The story of Katina Emmanouilidou (1933)*

The story of Katina (her real name was Marianthi Pispiloglou) differs from those above as she did not die in a demonstration. Her life, however, is unconventional, and her contribution to the labour movement is of equal importance, as well as being documented in Greek media. Katina was born in 1907 in Asia Minor and came as a refugee to Greece in 1922. According to the

*Ethnos* newspaper (1922), at the age of 15 she went to work as a servant in a household, but experienced attempted rape and left to find a job in a Piraeus (Attika) tobacco factory. In 1927, she participated in a tobacco workers' strike and became involved with the communist organisation of Bolsheviks and Leninists (KOLMEA) in Greece, becoming the representative of women. In 1930, commemorating women's contribution to the 1 May Labour Day demonstrations, she was arrested, beaten, and served a one-month sentence in prison. Her political action had an impact on other tobacco factories in Piraeus (*Ethnos*, 1922). After her imprisonment, she continued her activity but, in fear of being arrested, she left for Thessaloniki, where she was re-arrested during a demonstration and was sentenced to four months imprisonment. In 1932, speaking during another labour demonstration, she was re-arrested and again beaten by the police. According to the documentary *Michani tou Chronou* (n.d.), Katina had given birth three months previously. While in the police station, "people gathered and out of Christianity charity, demanded she be given the baby for breastfeeding" (*Michani tou Chronou*, n.d.). Katina was sentenced to three years in prison and two years on Gavdos, an isolated island. She escaped, however, and despite difficult interrogations, the other female prisoners showed solidarity and did not reveal any details. She lived in the houses of various comrades until she became ill and died in 1933.

Katina's life reveals various threads of women's lives during that period: being afraid of deviating from the norms and conventions; having a baby outside marriage; unionisation; arrest, and in her case, dramatic escape.

### **WOMEN IN THE FRONTLINE OF THE TOBACCO WORKERS' MOVEMENT IN GREECE**

Scholars note that the history of the labour movement in Greece is an under-researched topic (Ghikas, 2004), and the same is true for the contribution of tobacco workers. The tobacco industry itself, as an important economic activity of Greece's, has attracted some interest, focused on the changing dynamics of the national and international economy. Over time, there were shifts in the tobacco industry and the roles of women within it. Changes in agricultural practices, industrialization and urbanization impacted the tobacco industry and the roles of women. Furthermore, mechanization and changing economic factors – especially after the economic depression in the 1930s – led to a decline in tobacco cultivation in some regions. As a result, the number of tobacco workers employed in the industry also decreased and eventually almost disappeared. Nevertheless, the tobacco workers' movement itself needs more in-depth analysis. In recent years, however, the topic has attracted further interest and doctoral research activity is also increasing, examining local areas or particular aspects of the tobacco workers movement. The four stories of the women activists above reveal several aspects of Greece's labour history but also the scarcity of biographical information. The story of the women tobacco workers still needs to be told. Although there is scattered information in national and local newspaper articles and TV documentaries, and interest from local historians and some academics, there are still gaps in this narrative. The contribution of women tobacco workers to the emancipation of women in Greece needs more systematic investigation by academic and non-academic researchers. The later struggles of women as partisans during the Second World War and afterwards, or as political prisoners exiled to the Greek islands in the 1950s and the 1960s, is not dis-

connected from their actions in these earlier phases of the labour movement. According to Gall and Fiorito (2012), mobilization is central to the changing of beliefs and attitudes, and therefore the study of the individual unions is essential to better understand the evolution of a movement. We can extend that argument and consider how attitudes and beliefs changed women's position in society and how the women's movement developed as a result of, or in parallel to, the women tobacco workers' actions.

McBride et al. (2015) questioned whether we, as researchers, are "sufficiently problematizing relationships within categories of difference" (McBride et al., 2015: 338). Focusing on the tobacco workers' movement, more research is needed to better understand how particular characteristics and experiences shaped women tobacco workers' decisions to become activists and to give their lives for their activism. In doing so, further research can also reveal the contribution of other women working in the tobacco sector, such as Muslim or Jewish women who equally contributed to the development of the tobacco labour movement. Such an approach will further strengthen the intersectional perspective of such study.

The four stories in the previous section highlight the women's tough working environments and their poverty, as many arrived as destitute refugees, widowed or orphaned. Circumstances led them to break existing conventions and seek paid employment for survival, even if initially this was frowned upon by other women (Aggeli, 2007). In fact, women's work in the tobacco industry was an essential source of income for many families – especially refugee families as their labour helped support household finances and contribute to the local economy. Researchers have identified the hostility that women tobacco workers often faced from their employers as well as from male comrades who perceived them as a threat to their union positions or to negotiations and other actions (Mpakali, 2014). Such barriers did not cause women to step back, and they continued their work and their activism. E.P. Thomson's concept of "moral economy" is relevant here because it refers to the economic and social experiences of the working classes, who hold moral assumptions and expectations about economic justice and the distribution of resources. These assumptions were rooted in traditional customs, communal norms and a sense of social obligation (Thompson, 1963).

Paid work itself helped women to emerge from their "traditional" hidden or invisible roles of domestic work to a more organised work environment. As Butler (2011) suggests, when women's bodies are seen together – here both at work and in political activism – they challenge the prevailing (patriarchal) idea that divides males and females, associating them with a binary notion of public and private that assigns the domain of politics to men and reproductive labour to women (Butler, 2011). Therefore a closer look at what turned women tobacco workers into activists in such difficult conditions is worth considering further in future research.

According to Tilly (1978), collective action relies on five components: "interest, organization, mobilization, opportunity, and collective action itself" (Tilly, 1978: 7). All four stories have these five components in common. The historical circumstances shaped these women's experiences and motivations for their dynamic presence in the labour movement. Their opportunity came when they took employment in the tobacco factories. Moreover, as the labour movement grew, women became integral actors in mobilising other members, taking collective action and generat-

ing interest from other women in the sector. For Tilly, effective structures are key for the organisation of workers. In the case of women tobacco workers, given their strong activism, effective structures were co-produced by women's contributions and sacrifices to the labour movement (Tilly, 1978). This last point may be disputed because it was still men at the top of the hierarchy, both at work and in the unions and the political parties and associations; however, women did also contribute to a certain degree to the decision-making process.

The study of the women tobacco workers' movement reveals that women – as they have always done in the history of women's movements – rarely focus only on women's equality issues. Instead, they combine struggles for equality with other causes. The four stories reveal this: women died for their ideals to improve their working environments, for the men who became unemployed because they were replaced by women (as cheaper labour), for their freedom from disadvantage and discrimination because they were refugees, for breaking society's norms and for fighting against social class oppressions. Their dedication to their union was based on their ideological commitment rather than other expectations (Snape et al., 2000). Their contribution to women's liberation is significant, but in their world, it was secondary, as their own gender and class identity was formed in the intertwined space of the private home and their tobacco factory work. All four stories talk about agency in women's decisions to become active members of political parties or political ideologies as well as women's causes.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

To the contemporary visitor to towns in North Greece, the architectural industrial heritage of the tobacco production is visible in the form derelict tobacco processing warehouses or as regenerated areas for cultural activities. What it is not visible, however, is the enormity of the tobacco workers activity – neither as individual workers nor as organised, powerful unions which shaped the historical events of their time and the future of the labour movement in Greece. What is even less perceived is the story of women's participation in the actions and struggles of the trade unions of the time.

The article has unfolded the historical events of the interwar period in Greece by focusing of the story of four women activists, examining the circumstances of their activism and their subsequent deaths as a direct result of their dedication to the tobacco labour movement. Scholars have contended that the overall societal backdrop, encompassing cultural norms, economic circumstances, and policy structures, significantly influenced the experiences of women employed in the tobacco industry during this period. However, it has also been posited that these women played a pivotal role in shaping these circumstances, actively contributing to the developments within the labour movement. Although the presence of women in labour history has often been neglected, women and gender historians have equally tended to overlook the specific working experiences of women within the workforce. This paper therefore concludes that some areas need further (predominately archival) research to better understand the circumstances of the role of women tobacco workers in the wider labour movement in Greece, and their contribution to the development of women's position in Greek society ■

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