Interview with Markos Dragoumis

ALR: On April 21, 1967, a military coup took place in your country. Did the coup really come as a surprise to the left

DRAGOUMIS: This particular coup by this particular junta at this particular time came as a surprise to everybody except those who took part in it. We on the left had always subscribed to the theory that if a coup were to take place in Greece — and we had repeatedly stressed this possibility — it would come as direct result of the combined actions of the King, the traditional right who are organised in the National Radical Union (ERE) and the representatives of US imperialism.

A fortnight before the coup we concluded that two of the main pillars of reaction within Greece had opted for a "parliamentary" solution of the crisis. The King had agreed to elections and appointed the leader of the right, Kanellopoulos, as Prime Minister to organise them. We had also assumed that the Americans would think twice before risking a coup at a time when their Vietnam policies were under heavy fire both in Europe and at home. What we feared was a repetition, on a grand scale, of the rigged elections of 1961 with the Army and the police securing a safe majority for the right. In the event, the coup took everyone by surprise, including the King and Mr. Kanellopoulos who was among the first to be arrested. Over-simplified analyses and failure to study the very structure of the various forces threatening democracy in Greece led us into error. Circumstantial evidence about American involvement and fore-knowledge of the coup included, for instance, the advice to families of American diplomatic and the military personnel in Athens not to leave their homes and go out in the streets on the night of April 21. However one does not need to rely on this kind of evidence to ascertain the American involvement. The junta relies on the Pentagon and the NATO military command for their military aid and support and the American 6th Fleet pays regular visits to Greek ports.

Dr. Markos Dragoumis is a prominent member of the Greek Patriotic Front (PAM).

He recently visited Australia seeking moral and financial support for the struggle of the Greek people against the military junta, and just before he left gave this interview to ALR.

A former member of parliament, he has been an activist since his student days, and was interned for a year in 1955 in a political prisoners' camp.

He was abroad when the junta seized power on July 21, 1967.
ALR: It has been said that the leadership of the Greek Communist Party abroad has warned communists in Greece about the imminence of a coup and that these warnings were disregarded. Is this true?

D: No it is not. We have heard the story and we have asked for concrete evidence which has not been provided. When was this warning issued? Why did this leadership not make the warning public? In fact the General Secretary of the Party, Kolliyannis, in his closing speech at the 10th Plenum, held a few months before the coup, did not even mention the possibility let alone give directives as to how such a coup was to be faced by the Party. Let us face the truth: Nobody expected this coup at the time it occurred. As for the leadership of the CP, they were mainly preoccupied with the problem of the legalisation of the Party, not with taking measures to avert an imminent coup.

A.L.R.: Isn’t it true however that a coup was always possible, even probable, in Greece and that the left ought to have had some contingency plan to face it in case it happened?

D: This is true of course. I will try to explain what happened. It should be clear that we are discussing the unpreparedness of the left to face a coup, not necessarily its possibility to avert it. To believe that the left could have averted any coup at any time is a case of wishful thinking; but to believe that with proper contingency planning it could have avoided being caught unawares is, I think, more realistic. Our unpreparedness can be ascribed to the following main causes:

First the leadership of the CP had, after the events of summer 1965 (i.e. the dismissal of the lawfully elected Prime Minister George Papandreou which produced mass demonstrations and even a general political strike) under-estimated the determination of US ruling circles to clear up the situation by any means. On the other hand the leadership overestimated the effectiveness of mass political struggles and their potency against an enemy who controlled the Army and the police.

Second the peaceful road to socialism was interpreted by the leadership of the CP in the narrowest possible sense leading to a series of legalistic errors in estimating the enemy’s intentions. In a country where a dynamic democratic movement has been so long contained by police persecution, intimidation and political manipulation, the normal functioning of political democracy (even distorted, even impeded by the exceptional laws of the period of the civil war) was a danger in itself for the powers that be, and a democratic majority emerging through elections might have ended
the police state and taken the country towards more and more advanced forms of democracy and independence. Moreover, after the elections of the 29th of May — which never took place — it would have been more difficult to organise coups since one of the issues of the elections was to bring the army under civilian control and stop the King's interference in politics. In such a situation the blind insistence of the left on playing the game of peaceful evolution without considering that the enemy might at some stage stop the game by force, was an error.

These are the reasons why the preparations for an eventual coup were completely disregarded. Whatever communist organisations there were before the coup in Greece were not involved in planning action in case of a coup, not even securing printing facilities or a network of emergency hideouts for those militants who might have to go underground. I would like to stress here that the problem is not whether or not there were too few communist cells in Greece but what they were supposed to be doing. Those cells that existed were certainly not prepared to take over an underground struggle if the legal party of the left, EDA, were to be dissolved and its leaders arrested. It is indicative that the then leadership of the CP decided to reconstitute its party organisations in Greece in 1965, 7 years after having dissolved them in 1958. This decision of the 8th plenum in 1965 was taken because the CP felt conditions were ripe for it to become a legal party following the defeat of the right at the elections of 1964. The establishment of CP cells within the organisations of EDA was a sort of semi-legality for the party even though this meant that the cells were not much more than discussion groups. It can be argued that the creation of cells, completely independent of EDA, having as their primary concern the preparation for a coup and manned by communists relatively unknown to the police who would operate in strict secrecy as if the dictatorship was already established, could have had very beneficial effects, but this did not happen. When the coup came the underground organisation had to be built from scratch by the very communists who were the leaders of EDA.

These facts are not contested even by the Kolliyannis group who call themselves the leadership of the CP today.

ALR: How has this split in the Greek CP come about?

D: Immediately after the coup the members of the Central Committee of the CP within Greece went underground. Under the guidance of the Bureau of the Interior, that is the four member body which was in charge of the work of the party within Greece before the coup, they started organising the resistance against the
junta. Nine days after the coup the "Patriotic Front" was formed by Mikis Theodorakis, Andonis Brillakis (a member of the Bureau of the Interior), youth leaders and others not belonging to the left.

Almost three months after the coup the 11th Plenum took place abroad without the participation of, contact with or the knowledge of the members of the CC working inside Greece. As soon as contact was established the Bureau of the Interior sent a message to the leaders outside Greece which in essence said that discussion of the main problems facing the party should include them. They stated that it was a mistake to hold the 11th Plenum without them. While this plenum had simply opened the discussion the next would analyse the situation, call for the convening of a "representative body" (possibly a conference since a congress was difficult under the circumstances) and decide upon the responsibilities for the past, the line of the party, its alliances, the forms of struggle and the organisational structure. It was essential that members from within Greece should take part in this.

Suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, in February 1968 the members of the CC in Greece heard over the radio that the 12th Plenum had been convened and at the suggestion of the General Secretary, Kolliyannis, and that the four members of the Politbureau who were present had demoted the other three and that this decision was ratified by the votes of twelve full members of the CC abroad against nine full members opposed. Very serious accusations of "right wing opportunism", "factionalism", etc., were made against the dissidents. Such a serious vote was close enough but taking into account the alternate members of the CC there were actually 19 in favor and 19 against. Even more serious was the fact that a number of new members totally in support of Kolliyannis were then coopted both to the CC and the Politbureau.

The comrades of the Interior (whose number when added to the dissenters abroad placed Kolliyannis automatically in a minority) chose to resist this coup within the party. They suggested a new plenum, and suggested that the 12th Plenum should be considered as having never happened. They asked for a new plenum with the composition of the CC as it was before the 12th Plenum. This demand was rejected by Kolliyannis time and time again. When comrade Brillakis, representing the Interior, came out of Greece in June 1968 he was told by Kolliyannis that the validity of the 12th Plenum was to be the starting point for any discussions. Brillakis, representing the Interior, refused this.

From then on the split deepened and crystallised. The Kolliyannis group used all the means at their disposal to attack opponents within the Party. First they "purged" the party in a most unortho-
dox way. The criterion of whether or not someone was to be regarded as a party member was his acceptance of the validity of the 12th Plenum. Those questioning it were left out, not always expelled but simply barred from taking part in any of its organisations. In the EDA organisation abroad wherever the Kolliyannis group was in a minority they set up a parallel organisation. They did this quite recently in the “Patriotic Front” (PAM). First they announced the appointment of Tony Ambatiellos as the representative of PAM and maintained this despite the fact that the National Council of PAM made it quite clear in their underground paper Nea Hellada that the Front was represented abroad by Brillakis. Then desperate because the communists inside Greece, within the Front, did not recognise their action they set up a new body which they called “Central Committee of the Patriotic Front”. They have attacked by all the means put at their disposal by various socialist countries, leaders such as Glezos — our national resistance hero — and more recently Mikis Theodora-kis.

ALR: Is it true that they are a majority as they claim?

D: In a way they are more than that. They are the totality, the absolute unanimity, because their argument has become entirely circular. If a communist must accept the 12th Plenum then there are no communists opposing it any more. The truth of the matter is that amongst those who were members of the party before the 12th Plenum something like 25-30% have stayed with the Kolliyannis group. The CPSU supports the Kolliyannis group of course. But this fact cannot guarantee a significant part in the resistance. This requires the loyalty and dedication of Greek communists.

ALR: Have the differences between the communists inside Greece and those abroad been on matters of procedure all along?

D: No. But the demand for respect of the rules and the constitution of the party was decisive after the 12th Plenum. As things stand now the majority of the CC represented by leaders of the Interior plus “dissenters” abroad have the following differences with the Kolliyannis group. First democracy within the party. Democracy becomes a weapon in the struggle only if those in the struggle who risk torture, or life imprisonment, have the confidence that their opinions and views will be taken into account. Democratic procedure is not a luxury for easy periods. It is a method for the party to assimilate the wisdom and the inventiveness of all the militants. It is the only way that the party can become a “collective intellectual” as Gramsci put it.
Second, autonomy of the Greek CP. This must not be confined to lip service. Thus, for example, the CP regretted the invasion of Czechoslovakia while Kolliyannis hailed it as a success against "right wing opportunism", and the CP criticised the trade agreements of certain socialist countries with the junta. Autonomy cannot mean blind faith that the parties of some socialist countries, particularly the CPSU, are always right.

Third, the principle that what is to be done in Greece must be decided there. The CP has established the pre-eminence of the Interior, of the leadership inside the country. Not all its leaders are in Greece all of the time but the decisions are not imposed from without. The Kolliyannis group is out of touch with Greece. This has been the main reason why it has had so little success in co-operating with any other non-communist anti-junta forces within Greece or abroad. On the contrary it has attacked viciously Andonis Brillaklis for the agreements he signed with Prof. Andreas Papandreou, leader of PAK, and with the "Democratic Defence", that is with two main resistance organisations which are fighting within Greece. The Kolliyannis group cannot accept that the Greeks who resist have coordinated their action without it. Seeking to find something objectionable in these agreements a very big lie is propagated, namely that the resistance organisations have not included in their program the abolition of the anti-constitutional laws of the civil war banning the CP. All those who bothered to actually read the agreements know that this is not true but it is being repeated by radio stations broadcasting from six socialist countries, and by the Kolliyannis Voice of Truth as well.

Last but not least, I would like to mention that the Kolliyannis group accuse the Communist Party of having become a loose party of the social-democratic variety. This is an even bigger lie. The communists inside Greece have organisations which have not been damaged by the enemy. They have proved to be efficient organisers and have in their ranks the most experienced and ablest underground workers. Moreover, the Communist Party has made it quite plain that it advocates active resistance in all forms, including violent action to the extent that it has been used till now (bomb explosions and violence against property) because this keeps the junta on its toes and increases its persecution complex. The Kolliyannis group disapproves of these activities.

In conclusion I would express the view that despite the difficulties caused by the split, the CP is being strengthened because it is seeking its own national way towards advanced democracy and socialism, and overcoming the dogmas, the authoritarian methods and the prehistoric bureaucracy which in conjunction with its lack of autonomy have harmed it so much in the past.