The Greek Left in Australia

I

THE GREEK LEFT IN AUSTRALIA is an important topic about which much more ought to be said and written than appears in this article. It naturally concerns Greeks more than others though it would be difficult for the Australian Left to justify its disinterest in such a movement. To plead more, the Greek Left operates within and strives for the hegemony of Australia's second-largest ethnic minority — a community of 300,000 people, most of whom are industrial workers.

Like other immigrant radicalism the Greek Left stems from the general alienation of immigrants both from the country of settlement and of origin. Immigrants are aware that they are used as cheap labor, mere 'factory fodder' which is located in the inner suburban areas or near industries, and that they suffer all manner of discriminations in a society which still remains anti-foreign, xenophobic and exclusive. Australian society insofar as it is competitive is so only within its dominant Anglo-Saxon section which excludes incoming poor immigrants. Rewards simply go to those with capital, social contacts and skills, including a fundamental skill, the English language. For the non-British immigrant especially, the only way out—a way which fits into the scheme of expanding Australian capitalism—is, and has been, long hours of work and hard saving. After such an apprenticeship the other escape—from employers and unemployment—has been, for many Greeks at least, a shop. There the immigrant may double his income by doubling his hours of work and frequently by using his family and relatives as well.

The second main source of Greek Left radicalism is to be found in the 'old world'. The fact that Greece has always been the centre of conflicting big power and imperialist interests, the rise of fascism in Greece after 1936, the Second World War and the fierce Greek Civil War (1945-9), the movement for Cypriot
independence and finally, the re-emergence of fascism after April 1967, were events which radicalised Greeks and which called for action from Australia.

As could be expected the role of the Greek Left has been twofold: one was to help Greek immigrants fight for and assert their rights and solve the problems associated with the involvement of Greeks in the wider Australian radical left movement; the other was to participate in the numerous struggles of Greek people in Greece and elsewhere. In both cases the field of operation was mainly in Greek ethnic communities in Australia and the principal agencies through which the Greek left has acted were workers’ clubs, the Greek focos. Among these were Platon (1932-8) of Sydney and its successor Atlas (1939-) but also a semi-illegal group known as Spartakos which functioned during the war; Democritos (1935-) in Melbourne; the Greek Educational League (1942-4), Pan-Hellenic Society (1946-7), Platon (1957-) and Aristophanes after 1963 in Adelaide, Regas Pheraios (1943-9), Democratic Union (1949-51) and Palamas (1964-) in Brisbane; and Socrates of Newcastle and Heraclitus of Wollongong from the early 1960's onwards. Other leftist organisations such as 'Leagues or Committees for Democracy in Greece' (after 1947 and again later in the mid-1960's), the Confederation of Greek Organisations (1949-51) and the Lambrakis Youth Clubs (after 1964) were also active along radical lines but much of their activity was supplementary to, often prescribed by, and directed from workers’ clubs.

To understand more the role, range of activities and the problems of Greek workers’ clubs, it is necessary to look briefly at the structure of Greek ethnic communities. The term ‘ethnic community’ is used here to mean a Greek community or settlement such as that of Melbourne, which at present contains about 80,000 people or that of Townsville in North Queensland which contains about 200. As ethnic communities grow numerically they fragment organisationally. The principal Greek immigrant organisations to which all immigrants may belong are Greek Orthodox Communities whose main task has been to found and maintain churches and schools, that is, agencies which hope to preserve the national-religious traditions and ethos of Greeks. Also important in terms of ethnic community were the numerous regional or local fraternities, social, cultural and sporting associations, coffee-houses, newspapers, consulates and the church hierarchy. All told, each large Greek ethnic community has been a very complicated social network, though the social and political divisions and issues in each community were not so complicated.

To the left it was a question of continually resisting the power
of the Greek Establishment comprised of the wealthy shopkeeper class which traditionally controlled the most important ethnic institutions: the Church, Greek Orthodox Communities, consulates, newspapers and organisations such as the Hellenic Clubs in Sydney and Brisbane. This resistance arose not simply because wealthy Greeks exploited the few immigrant workers they employed — though this was true — but because the left correctly identified the Greek Establishment with its counterpart in Australia and Greece. Consequently in the pre-war period, the activities of the left included organising the unemployed to demand work and more dole (in the case of the latter, the leftists demanded it come from church takings); verbal and written attacks on the Greek bishops; agitation against dictator Metaxas and his fund-raising campaign conducted in Australia and elsewhere to build up the Greek air force; and organised attempts to influence the composition of councils of Greek Orthodox Communities — attempts which succeeded in Sydney during 1939 and which also culminated in the occupation by a left anti-bishop coalition of the Community's Holy Trinity church for several months. This particular episode, indicating that the left had made significant inroads into an important ethnic institution, happened under rather exceptional circumstances. As soon as the pro and anti-bishop groups settled their differences the left was ousted from the Community positions it held.

Because few Greek immigrants in the pre-war period worked for an Australian employer and fewer still where unionised labor operated, there was little contact, let alone fusion, between the Greek and the wider Australian left. The only known Greek trade unionist was Andreas Raftopoulos, a kitchen hand, who before he suicided in 1940, was an unpaid organiser for the Hotel, Club and Restaurant Employees' Union in Sydney. Greek workers were in any case few, most of them worked in restaurants or were itinerant seasonal workers, and as such were difficult to organise. Membership in each of Platon and Democritos did not exceed forty.

The war and postwar years witnessed many changes. The war brought many Greeks into the factories and trade unions, some into the army, and greater profits to the shopkeepers. The postwar brought massive Greek immigration at first from Cyprus and, especially after 1952, from Greece. Australia's Greek population increased from about 15,000 in 1947 to about 300,000 in 1970. Most of these also went to work in industry and joined trade unions. The overall effect of this great influx on ethnic communities was to sharpen existing social and political divisions. More so since some of these divisions and associated political issues were related, often deliberately by Greek left and right both to
those of the host society and to the world at large. Easily the most important political issue was the Greek Civil War and the wider world conflict which followed, the Cold War.

The response of the Greek left to these new and changing conditions should be noted because it throws considerable light on its policies, action programmes and methods of work. As in the prewar period, their workers' clubs were retained and extended as the most appropriate form of political organisation. Such clubs, did, of course, perform a number of other functions associated with the social, cultural, welfare and sporting life of immigrants, but their importance lies in their wider political role. Within ethnic communities workers' clubs consistently campaigned for the politicising of ethnic institutions, especially Communities, so that such institutions might become involved in the more real problems of incoming migrants: housing, jobs, social welfare, interpreting services, unemployment relief — that is, demands which could be met fully only if Communities along with other ethnic authorities were prepared to stand up and fight. Just as important was the left's policy of opposing right-wing and pro-fascist Greek governments and their representatives in Australia; agitation against oppression in Greece, the gaoling and, as late as 1952, the execution of prominent Greek trade unionists, communists, other left leaders and former resistance fighters; and agitation for Cypriot independence, an issue which was both a national and anti-imperialist one and which, more than anything else, enhanced greatly the left's position in ethnic communities including in Greek Orthodox Communities on whose councils the left began to be elected by the late 1950's. Considering the religious and other functions of Greek Orthodox Communities, the entry in them of the left helped precipitate a fierce religious schism (now in its eleventh year), though the current schism, like others, also stemmed from the very nature of Communities: they are essentially lay bodies through which a hierarchal Church has to function so that there is a perpetual conflict over Community and Church rights, privileges and prerogatives.

Outside ethnic communities the Greek left made important advances in achieving Greek immigrant participation and also representation in trade unions; probably much more so than did other non-British immigrant groups. Two main factors operated. The first was the role of Greek Cypriots whose knowledge of British-type trade unions helped them embrace Australian trade unions with ease and even hold union positions. The second was the ready response the Greek left found among the more militant trade unionists, but particularly those of the waterfront in its political work in the cause of Greek democracy. The Se
men's Union of Australia was especially important in that respect: one of its many contributions was to help set up during the war an Australian branch of the Greek Seamen's Union. Yet it is doubtful whether such important inroads would have been made without the constant organisational work of and campaigning by workers' clubs and the bi-lingual political activists these clubs produced. Immigrant representation in trade union leadership (as in other host societal public institutions) is, of course, small and it never corresponds to the immigrant numerical strength. So these inroads by Greek immigrants are significant, for it has been demonstrated that it is possible to achieve some fusion between immigrant and Australian left and radicalism despite the obstacles stemming from different cultural backgrounds and differing aims and motives.

II

From the dual role of the Greek left—to involve immigrants in the wider Australian left movement and simultaneously campaign for such causes as democracy in Greece and Cypriot independence—stemmed a third role or function. This was to impart to the Australian left further knowledge of what in effect were anti-imperialist struggles of Greeks and Cypriots. Considering the issues involved in these struggles (they were against the governments of Great Britain and the US) and the people to whom the Greek left directed its appeals—workers, trade unionists, ALP politicians, communists, churchmen, pacifists and philhellenes—the response to such appeals was decidedly a mixed one. Yet Greek leftist activity and agitation was not ineffective. Together with other factors the Greek left succeeded in prevailing upon Dr. Evatt to intervene (in 1948 when he was president of the UN General Assembly) to help save from certain execution such prominent Greek trade unionists as Tony Ambatielos; in getting the ALP or branches of it to support Cypriot independence in the late 1950's and the restoration of Greek democracy after 1967; and in securing support in campaigns to boycott Greek ships and condemn oppressive measures in Greece. Overall the Greek left did help radicalise and politicise somewhat the Australian labor movement, philhellenes and others, and, more to the point, closer bonds were forged between the immigrant and native radical left movements.

There were, however, a number of factors limiting the fuller fusion or integration of the Greek immigrant and Australian left. These will now be examined in some detail in order to explain a number of the Greek left's features and problems, including its present schism. One of the real obstacles to integration is the
power of ethnic communities to draw inward and retain their members and organised sections and hence circumscribe their activities and roles. This was especially so in the post-1950 period during which ethnic communities grew enormously, for this was the period when approximately 90 per cent of Australia's Greeks arrived. Being new and large communities and because the cultural and linguistic barrier between immigrant and native was also at its highest point, it was necessary for the left to become concerned with ethnic community affairs. The religious dispute after 1959 further absorbed the left in the complexity of the social network and politics of ethnic communities.

Throughout the period contesting elections in this or that ethnic organisation but particularly in Communities, and fighting reactionary clergymen, laymen, consuls and newspaper owners taxed the resources of the left and was often considered more important than solving the problems of involving immigrants in the left and labor movements. To be sure, questions of democracy, particularly the need to retain the democratic charters and the secular activities of Communities which were constantly under attack by an authoritarian and fiercely anti-communist Archbishop, were important issues to be fought and won. Yet for the left some of the battles won were pyrrhic victories. Greek workers became hopelessly divided in the course of the religious schism: it was not unusual to find Greek workers in a factory disputing the fine points of canon law instead of uniting together with other workers to fight the more oppressive labor codes.

Another obstacle to integration stemmed from the rather broad and fragile alliance that more or less comprised the left, and from certain assumptions that were to guide the movement’s policies and action programmes. The Greek left in Australia was indeed a delicate alliance. The hard core in workers' clubs were members and sympathisers of the Communist Party and people who were generally sympathetic to the Soviet Union. Yet to the workers' clubs and related organisations flocked people motivated by reasons other than ideological ones: supporters of the Community cause during the religious schism; people interested in sporting and cultural activities, particularly theatre goers; ordinary immigrants thankful for any practical assistance given by workers' club members; Centre Union Party loyalists who would otherwise be expected to join and support the ALP; and people who preferred the congenial environment of workers' club rooms to that of the gambling dens which most other coffee-houses were. In view of all this it is not surprising that both Atlas and Democritos clubs have had no less than 2,000 names recorded on their membership list; yet that neither club has managed to retain more than about 100-150 financial
and active members at any one time is an indication of the uneasiness of the alliance of the forces making them up.

All manner of factors operated to cause this high turnover of membership. A similar turnover occurred in other immigrant organisations indicating a high ‘mobility’ of immigrants that is to be expected in a period when ethnic communities and ethnic organisations are in the process of formation and establishment. Yet much of the loss of membership to workers’ clubs stemmed from their sectarian and short-sighted policies. In the period under consideration it was often assumed to be sufficient (from the viewpoint of building workers’ clubs and fashioning their role as agencies for integration) to applaud socialist gains outside Australia, organise large immigrant contingents in May Day marches, hold successful annual balls under the patronage of prominent trade unionists and ALP politicians, and acquire spacious and expensive club rooms. Rarely, if ever, did the workers’ clubs and the Greek left in general become seriously concerned with an analysis of the role of massive migration in the context of expanding Australian capitalism, the true socio-economic position of migrants and the many forms of discrimination they suffered—that is, an analysis to reveal the true nature of Australian capitalism and thus formulate an immigrant socialist theory and strategy. Even less was done to contact other immigrant groups suffering similar exploitation, and initiate common action. A typical leftist answer to immigrant workers who saw few benefits from well-paid reformist trade union leaders was: the good wages and conditions you enjoy you owe to the trade unions. Such an inadequate answer, it may be noted, corresponds closely with the frequently adopted capitalist approach which insists in relating the conditions of migrants to those of the country of origin (such as war-torn Europe or Italy, Spain and Greece today) and not to what these conditions ought to be in an affluent society such as Australia.

Just as ineffective was the role of the Greek left’s press. While Neos Kosmos became the radical left’s bible in its early years, subsequently the paper compromised considerably in response to competition from other ‘centrist’ newspapers, to the needs of the wider community, with advertisers and with ALP policies.

Finally, several factors for which the Greek left cannot be held responsible operated against integration. Briefly these were the refusal by the Immigration authorities to grant citizenship rights to immigrant leftist political activists, which discourages and frightens potential left activists; the inability of the Australian left and the labor and trade union movements to understand immigrants and their problems and consequently the refusal to implement measures
to ensure the fullest possible participation of immigrants in the various sections and levels of the radical left; and the insistence by the Australian left and labor movement that immigrants conform to the standards of the former.

While it is to be expected and is quite normal for the indigenous radical left movement to integrate and eventually assimilate its immigrant counterpart, the process by which this takes place is never a smooth one. As has been shown in the case of the Greek left in Australia the process is fashioned, hindered or accelerated by all sorts of factors, including factors and forces often remote from the actual scene. This can be further demonstrated by considering the recent split in the Greek left—a split which also illustrates some of the movement's weaknesses outlined so far. Two events which occurred in Europe are especially relevant to and could be said to have been largely responsible for causing the split. One was the military coup in Greece in April 1967, which, among other things, split the Greek Communist Party (KKE) and the Greek left in general. The two sections of the KKE comprise on the one hand the supporters of its leadership which has been abroad in Eastern Europe since 1949, and on the other the supporters of the Internal Bureau of the KKE, based and operating within Greece. The other event was the invasion of Czechoslovakia by five Warsaw Pact powers in August, 1968. Among those condemning the invasion were the Internal Bureau of the KKE and the Communist Party of Australia. The consequences of these condemnations—which were interpreted as a direct attack on the Soviet Union, traditionally considered the mother and leader of the world's socialist system—was to alienate from the CPA many if not most of its Greek-born members and supporters, and with these the workers' clubs. For these condemnations shattered the ideological monolith from which the Greek left especially drew its inspiration and hope.

Being now in a state of considerable flux it is difficult to designate precisely the two main alignments or fragments of the once powerful Greek left and their policies and programmes. What is certain if the Greek left is to survive and play its role is that it must come to grips more with Australian reality. This means grappling with the actual problems of Greek immigrants and their descendants—the second generation Greek-Australians whose numbers are increasing and who, though much more assimilated than first generation Greeks, are nonetheless an integral part of ethnic communities. These problems are, of course, to be found in the factories, in the poor suburbs, and in general at the lower levels of the social hierarchy where Greek and other immigrant workers work, live, strive and are exploited by Australian capitalism.