

The Greek-Australian Unemployed Movement and the Construction of the Migrants' Rights Discourse*

Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos

This paper will present a brief history of the organised attempts within the Greek-Australian communities to address the problem of high unemployment in the 1950s. Focusing on the formation and work of the Greek Migrants' Unemployed Committee in Melbourne, we will argue that the Committee's appeal to migrants' right to work initiated the social processes that were to draw the Greek-Australian communities into the emerging rights discourse of the times. The political campaigns for the rights of the unemployed consequently paved the way for migrant workers' formulation of their future demands to the Australian state for equal rights and social justice.

Introduction

In the early 1950s Melbourne's unemployed migrants formed the Greek Migrants' Unemployed Committee. They called upon the established community organisations to adopt a principle of mutual aid and in doing so they challenged the conservative community's reliance on the discourse of philanthropy. Rejecting their positioning as what we have elsewhere termed "the perpetual-foreigners-within" (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004a; 2004b), the members of the Greek Migrants' Unemployed Committee headed a community wide campaign for the rights of unemployed migrant workers. In this paper we will outline the process leading to the formation of the committee. We will argue that the historical significance of the committee's formation rests with its success in leading the organised Greek-Australian communities into the 1960s rights discourse that was

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to flourish both nationally and internationally. This discourse not only made possible the articulation of the migrant workers' employment, welfare, education and communication needs in terms of positive rights to the state's resources throughout the 1960s (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004a:257–66) but it also framed the migrant and ethnic rights movements of the 1970s (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004a:281–95).

Unemployment as a social problem

In the early 1950s progressive community organisations that had been established in Melbourne and Sydney from the 1930s (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2002) began to focus their efforts on the plight of the unemployed almost as soon as the problem had arisen. At the Democritus league annual general meeting on Sunday 8 June 1952 the two hundred members in attendance resolved to form the *εργατική επιτροπή*, a committee for labour issues charged with the responsibility of concentrating its efforts on the unemployed. The committee's objectives were twofold: to develop public awareness of the problems of the migrant unemployed amongst the wider Greek and Australian communities and to cooperate with the trade unions to generate solutions. The Greek Atlas League followed a similar path in Sydney (*The Greek-Australian Review*, July 1952). On 15 June the annual general meeting of Melbourne's Cypriot Brotherhood Xenon resolved to support the Democritus league initiatives (*The Greek-Australian Review*, July 1952). By the end of the month, on 24 June, thirty-five members of the Democritus league met again. They formed the committee for labour issues and immediately resolved to bring to the government's attention the situation of Melbourne's unemployed Greek and Cypriot migrants. A four-member delegation of the committee was selected to attend the Melbourne offices of the Department of Immigration. The delegation notified the authorities of the committee's demands "that migration be stopped until work is available for migrants arriving here" and "that the Federal Government spend more money on public works to relieve the unemployment position" (Attorney General's Department, 9 July 1952). For its part, Xenon initiated the community awareness campaign by holding an August lecture on "Unemployment and its consequences" at the Democritus league clubrooms (*The Greek-Australian Review*, September 1952).

Atlas, Democritus and Xenon took these initiatives in response to the perceived indifference of the other community organisations to the urgent needs of the unemployed. In the eyes of the Greek-Australian activists taking part in the launch of the campaign, the communities' oldest and best placed organisations to deal with the plight of the unemployed, the Greek Orthodox Community of Melbourne and Victoria (GOCMV) and the Greek Orthodox Community of New South Wales, were doing little to address the major issues. The GOCMV had formed the Κοινοτική Επιτροπή Βοήθειας Ανέργων, the Community Unemployed

Relief Committee, but this committee's actions were restricted to isolated gestures of philanthropy. The conservatives within the Greek community typically appealed to philanthropy given that they considered unemployment to be a matter of individual misfortune and hardship.

The progressive organisations' community awareness campaign broke free of this narrow representation of the unemployment problem. As a social rather than merely individual problem the situation of the unemployed also called for community attention to the social conditions that were giving rise to the many cases of individual hardship. To this end, Democritus made formal representations to the Greek Consul, Mr Gorman, urging him "to take the initiative and call a meeting of all Greek organisations whose purpose will be to find the most reasonable and practicable ways for assisting the unemployed". Moreover, the league argued, "there are today more than two hundred Greek unemployed. They have been out of work for two, three or even four months. Their families are really starving at home" (Democritus, 6 August 1952).

In a similar vein *The Greek-Australian Review*, a monthly journal that had been in circulation from the previous year, called upon the GOCMV to take serious action. The editorial of the November edition commented that even though the GOCMV was not doing enough for the unemployed, it was still not too late for it to call a meeting of all community organisations to mobilise them into action. It insisted on the indispensability of creating a united front that could include not only all the Greek community organisations but also the Greek Church authorities. A united front was necessary to maximise the potential for success with the community's demands upon the Australian state (*The Greek-Australian Review*, November 1952).

At the same time as seeking to form a united front within the Greek community in order collectively to demand solutions for the unemployed, Democritus positioned itself alongside the Australian labour movement's struggle to defend the rights of Australian workers against what had become a serious unemployment problem for all. As the historian and political activist Ralph Gibson recalls, "in March 1953 a big demonstration took place in Canberra [... as] part of a nationwide struggle against unemployment" (Gibson, 1966:180). The Democritus league Executive Committee met on 16 February 1953 to plan its role in the campaign against the Menzies government's "anti-people policies". Since, the first task was to inform the Greek community of the Australian workers' campaign, the Executive Committee held a public meeting at the Democritus league premises after having flooded the community meeting places with a flyer that set out the issues surrounding unemployment, the housing shortages, and the continued immigration despite these conditions (Democritus, 1951-1953). On 1 March the public meeting resolved to support the Canberra demonstration and passed a protest resolution that linked migrants' right to work to other rights such as to live in peace and to learn "their own language" (Public Meeting, 1 March 1953).

The meeting resolved to send three delegates to Canberra, including Andreas Kyriakou, a Cypriot activist and trade unionist who had joined the Democritus league immediately on his arrival in Australia the previous year (BOHP, 1985:16). When the delegates attended the 11 March demonstration in Canberra they were amongst the hundreds handing letters of protest to the police guarding the politicians who waited behind the locked doors of Parliament House (Gibson, 1966: 181).

From the outset, then, the workers' leagues envisaged a two-pronged approach to the problems of the unemployed: one focused on offering support to their fellow community members in need and the other sought to address unemployment as a social problem that warranted government action. Because government action was unlikely in the absence of community pressure, it was necessary to mobilise all concerned through the Greek-Australian community organisational networks. Moreover, because community pressure was more likely to succeed with the operation of the broadest possible united front it was also necessary to link the Greek community actions with the Australian labour movement campaigns.

Mutual aid and the organisation of unemployed migrants

Unlike the conservative community organisations that generally shied away from speaking in terms of the *rights* of migrants, the Democritus league's approach to addressing the issues was in no way reminiscent of relationships like philanthropy that took for granted the disparities in people's economic well-being. In accordance with its long-standing commitment to the principles of social equality and collective self-determination (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2002), Democritus encouraged the unemployed to organise themselves and take the lead to advance their interests collectively. On Sunday 17 August 1952 about 70 unemployed Greek migrants, including Democritus league members, gathered at Melbourne's Savoy Theatre. Trade union officials from the hospitality industry addressed the meeting alongside Panos Yerontakis, a Democritus league member who had been elected President of the newly formed Greek Migrants' Unemployed Committee (*The Greek-Australian Review*, September 1952). In addition to electing its ten-member Executive Committee, the meeting adopted a program of action:

1. To form an Unemployed Relief Fund to be supported by individuals and organisations;
2. To develop a jobs promotion policy for unemployed Greek migrants by calling upon: trade unions to act on behalf of the unemployed; Greek businessmen to employ Greek migrants; and Greek organisations and the Greek Consulate to demand from the Australian Government that jobs be created for Greek migrants as is the case currently with the Italians;

3. To call a meeting of all Greek community organisations asking them to adopt and support the implementation of the above mentioned program (*The Greek-Australian Review*, September 1952).

One of the Committee's first initiatives was to raise funds for the unemployed by organising a social function on 10 October 1952. On 10 November the Savoy was the site of the Committee's first quarterly general meeting. There the President Panos Yerontakis reported that the Committee had already raised over one hundred pounds, half of which had been allocated to the relief of unemployed migrants. Jobs were found for ten people and accommodation secured for another seven. Committee members had repeatedly attended personally at the offices of the Greek Consulate and the Australian government's migrant employment service to make representations on behalf of unemployed migrants. Along with other Democritus league members they routinely visited the Melbourne ports to greet the new arrivals with leaflets informing them of the difficult employment situation and of the hardships being faced by the residents of the migrant holding camp at Bonegilla (Democritus, 13 June 1953; Gergou, 4 April 2001).

Having bowed to the ongoing pressure to take action, the GOCMV finally called a meeting of community organisations that was held on 4 December 1952 at the Orpheas clubrooms. There the meeting agreed to dismantle the two pre-existing committees for the unemployed and to form the Panhellenic Unemployed Relief Committee of Victoria (PURCV, 18 December 1952). Even so, the Greek Migrants' Unemployed Committee remained uneasy about the Panhellenic Committee's narrow terms of reference according to which the Committee was: "to find jobs and to offer financial and other support to unemployed Greek migrants" (PURCV, 18 December 1952). Assistance and solutions to the problems of the unemployed had once again been reduced to addressing the immediate needs of individual victims.

Attempts within the Greek community to maintain a united front quickly proved unsuccessful. In the early part of the year the Democritus league made countless representations to the Panhellenic Committee to send a fact-finding delegation to the Bonegilla camp. It insisted that the Panhellenic Committee move quickly upon its formation. An investigation of the situation of Greek unemployed migrants was not only necessary but it was also vitally important to initiate a program of action to address the migrants' urgent needs without delay (Democritus, 27 January 1953). By late April 1953, when it had become clear that the Democritus league's efforts to push the Panhellenic Committee into action had been frustrated, the Greek Migrants' Unemployed Committee, the collective of unemployed Greek migrants that had been disbanded with the formation of the Panhellenic Committee, swung back into action. When certain members of the Panhellenic Committee succeeded in postponing indefinitely any visits to the Bonegilla camp, the Democritus league and the Greek Migrants' Unemployed Committee took matters into their own hands (Democritus, 2 July 1953).

Migrants' rights in the Bonegilla camp

On Saturday 16 May 1953 and then again on Sunday 24 May 1953 Democritus sent one of its own representatives to the Bonegilla camp. The league claimed that 270 migrants had been residing at the camp for between one and two months since their arrival from Greece. On the first visit a reporter from *The Guardian* accompanied the Democritus league representative and together they exposed the government's handling of the situation (*The Guardian*, 21 May 1953). The second visit to the Bonegilla camp included members from organisations affiliated to the Panhellenic Committee such as the Olympic Youth and Panos Yerontakis who went along in his capacity as Secretary of the Greek Migrants' Unemployed Committee. Even though the Panhellenic Committee had not participated in the decision to conduct the fact-finding mission, the secret service records also implicated this Committee given that Yerontakis was simultaneously serving as its Assistant Secretary (Administrative Officer's Report, 25 May 1953). The delegation met with the camp residents, who complained bitterly about their intolerable living conditions: many of the migrants were inappropriately clothed to handle the cold; living conditions were poor; and inadequate food was being rationed without regard to the needs of children and pregnant women (Special Branch Report, 5 June 1953:4). On the second visit the camp authorities ordered out the intruders as soon as they became aware of their presence (*The Guardian*, 29 May 1953). The incident triggered a strong reaction since by this time Democritus was well placed to assert the civil rights of migrants against the Australian state. When the league complained to the Minister for Immigration, Harold Holt, it insisted that the camp authorities acted "most undemocratic[ly] and against the Rights of Migrants" (Democritus, 9 July 53).

After these two visits to the Bonegilla camp Democritus issued a leaflet reporting on the miserable living conditions and the despair of people at the camp. The leaflet gave voice to the Bonegilla camp residents' demands that the Menzies government either find jobs for them or send their families back home. It severely criticised Mr Lambrou, a visiting Minister of the Greek government, for his deceit and indifference to the plight of the Bonegilla migrants. According to the Bonegilla migrants, he had promised that they would be given work no later than one week following arrival in Australia and that he would personally take up any cases of hardship amongst the migrants (Democritus, undated a). Democritus pointed out that thanks to the Greek government's misleading propaganda the newly arriving migrants were under the false impression that the Australian government had guaranteed their employment for two years. In reality the indenture agreement only imposed an obligation on the migrants to accept any offer of a contract (Democritus, 2 July 1953).

A week later the May edition of the *Democratic Bulletin* also warned that three hundred more Greek migrants were due to arrive at the camp. It called upon the Papagos government of Greece to put a hold on emigration in the light of the

Australian unemployment situation. Democritus also demanded that the visiting Greek Minister Mr Lambrou put pressure on the Australian government to find jobs for the unemployed. Moreover, it drew attention to the failure of Greek community organisations, particularly the GOCMV and the Panhellenic Committee, to come to the aid of the Bonegilla migrants and called upon their compatriots to take immediate action in their support (*Democratic Bulletin*, May 1953).

For their own part league members held public meetings to rally support for the newly arriving migrants. On their return trips from Bonegilla they made stops at country towns to mobilise Greek migrants living and working in the country (Gergou, 4 April 2001). From their clubrooms in the city they coordinated warm clothing and blanket collections for the Bonegilla migrants. Moreover, they encouraged the Bonegilla residents to take their fate into their own hands; to organise within the camp in order to form a strong collective voice. In a letter to a Bonegilla migrant with whom they had earlier made contact, they routinely advised:

as a first step, in our view, you would do well to form a committee of about 5 or 6 people who should try to take action within the camp collectively and to keep us informed so that we can promote your demands through the trade unions and publicise your situation with articles in the press. Your committee would need to move quickly amongst those newly arriving to the camp. Any delay in establishing contact will result in the authorities allocating jobs to the two or three leaders within your committee in order to break it up (Democritus, undated b).

Thus the league encouraged the Bonegilla camp migrants to organise collectively to demand their right to a decent settlement process. At the same time, by calling public attention to the *rights* of migrants to work and to receive decent living conditions, Democritus was effectively challenging the operative migrant worker discourses that positioned the southern European migrant as the perpetual foreigner. As we have argued elsewhere, to assert the rights of migrants at a time when the dominant white Australian discourses demanded that the migrants act as “compliant foreigners” or risk being identified as the inassimilable “subversive foreigners” was altogether to reject the standpoint of the “perpetual-foreigner-within” (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004c:75).

The response of the Australian authorities

The CIB Special Branch that kept files on the Democritus league activists had reported on the visits to the Bonegilla camp and noted the likelihood of “further trouble” being incited amongst Greeks at the camp. The investigating officer recorded the personal details of two camp residents and their families since “it would appear that these persons are the contacts for [...] the Democritus League”. His evidence of the camp residents’ potential for causing trouble was that they had complained to their visitors about their living conditions (Special Branch Report, 5 June 1953:4).

The investigating officer's comments give us a clear insight into the status that the surveillance authorities were prepared to assign to migrants. If migrants complained about their own circumstances or took an active interest in the plight of their fellow migrants they were considered "trouble-makers" (Special Branch Report, 5 June 1953:2) and could justifiably be relegated to the category of the "subversive foreigners" constituting a danger to the nation. According to this category, as a social group southern European migrants constituted the inassimilable other that by definition was incapable of genuine loyalty to the white Australian state. The CIB and later the ASIO authorities, who monitored the movements of non-British migrants (Dutton, 1998; 2002), systematically invoked this discourse of the subversive foreigner when dealing with southern European migrants. Yet this was also a time when the Curtin government's immigration program presupposed that southern Europeans could demonstrate their loyalty to white Australia in accordance with an image of "the compliant foreigner" (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004a:43–80; 2004c).

The Greek-Australian activists' refusal to act as compliant foreigners is probably what led Greek and Australian authorities to step up their fear and intimidation campaign against the Democritus league members and their supporters. The May 1953 issue of the *Democratic Bulletin* claimed that Greek Minister Mr Lambrou "has let loose his jackals to back that the people who are trying to help you are the Communists with their poisonous fangs [...]with their rusty propaganda about the sly communists are trying to stop every sincere philanthropic and democratic thinking person from helping with the barefooted and starving of Bonegilla" (*Democratic Bulletin*, May 1953). In the next issue of the *Democratic Bulletin* the Democritus league reported:

Our league first sent representatives to Bonegilla and in that way the truth [about migrants' conditions] was disclosed. When we proposed to go a second time, a member of the Immigration Department phoned and asked by name for the man going and told him not to go. This man of the Immigration Department, how did he know who was proposing to go but because some member knew and betrayed him. For, in 4th June, a secret member of the Investigation Department, some man entitled Mr White visited our office and without beating about the bush he told us the Bulletin of the Democratic League must stop (*Democratic Bulletin*, June 1953).

A CIB Service internal memo shows that the publication rights relating to the *Democratic Bulletin* became an issue when the Bulletin was linked to "what is termed therein 'Menzies' drive against Greek press'" (Deputy Director CIB, 4 August 1953). Like *The Greek-Australian Review* that the government had just forced to close down, the *Bulletin* was targeted not just for its criticisms of the government but also for insisting on migrants' right to have their say (*Democratic Bulletin*, June 1953; Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004a:227–36).

Despite ongoing pressures to act as compliant foreigners, the Greek-Australian activists continued to provide support for the unemployed whilst urging them to

organise and demand their right to work. The Greek-Australian activists' insistence on the principle of collective self-determination inevitably meant that support for the unemployed was progressively implicating the wider organised community in the emerging rights discourse of the times.

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