

# Platon: Adelaide's Greek Workers' League\*

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The year 2007 marks fifty years from the formation of Adelaide's Greek-Australian workers' league, Platon. Drawing on the record of the league's inaugural meeting we offer a snapshot of the hopes and aspirations of the Greek-Australians who identified "the problems of migrant workers", namely "language, unemployment and a different lifestyle" as a central neglected social issue within Adelaide's organised community. Through a discussion of the early formative years we argue, firstly, that in close collaboration with Democritus and Atlas, the older established Greek-Australian workers' leagues of Melbourne and Sydney, Platon counter-posed an alternative to the dominant vision of migrant and ethnic community life which it based on the principles of mutual aid and collective self-determination. Secondly, we illustrate the role that Platon played in the establishment of strong links with the wider Australian labour and social movements.

## Introduction

On 4 October 1957, the year in which the Greek-Australian Left commenced circulation of the newly established Greek language newspaper *Neos Kosmos*, a dedicated group of Adelaide's Greek-Australians met to form a new association of migrant workers. The founding members gathered together at the invitation of the "Provisional Committee of the Greek Workers' League" which proposed that the organisation be devoted to three broad aims. The first was to address the problems that the migrants were facing, especially overcoming the language barrier and finding work. The second was to establish links with the Australian people generally and, more specifically, with Australian workers. The third aim was to play a vital role in educating migrants about

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Australian living conditions (PC, 4 October 1957). Being part of the Greek-Australian Left, the Provisional Committee members were probably influenced as much by the then policy of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), which encouraged activists to support broad based community organisations, as by an acute awareness of the desperate need of many newly arriving migrants for various forms of assistance. Still, as the choice of a name for the organisation attests, the decision to form the new workers' league reflected neither a desire to implement the directive of some perceived outside authority, like the CPA, nor a desire to act philanthropically towards less fortunate fellow migrants, as was the dominant tendency of the times (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004:81–118). Rather, it reflected a belief in migrants' collective power to shape the society in which they were to live by drawing upon and adapting the best aspects of their traditions of struggle for a better world. When the discussion turned to the task of finding a suitable name for the organisation, the meeting drew upon symbols from their Greek cultural heritage, an approach that had also been taken by the founders of the sister organisations the Greek Democritus League, established in Melbourne in 1935, and the Greek Atlas League, established in Sydney in 1939 (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004:139–158). The inaugural meeting selected the name "Platon" from amongst three proposals, the other two being "Socrates" and "Aristotle" (GM, 4 October 1957). The focus on these Greek philosophers' names indicates something of the spirit of the gathering. All three represent internationally recognised symbols of reflective dedication to lifelong learning about the best ways to live in and as a political community. Highlighting their commitment to collective self-education, the founders settled on the name *Εργατικός και Μορφωτικός Σύνδεσμος Νοτίου Αυστραλίας, Πλάτων* (Platon). The league members later incorporated their association under the name "Greek Workers' Educational Association, Platon" (GM, October 1965).

At the inaugural meeting of Platon the participants expressed concern that Adelaide's existing community organisations were not doing enough to address the problems of migrant workers, problems such as "language, unemployment and a different lifestyle". The meeting emphasised the need for collective organisation as a means of developing mutual aid amongst members. It also suggested that the significance of establishing links with the Australian people lay in their potential for creating "an environment that is more familiar and friendly". The participants wanted to establish themselves as a viable, self-sufficient and independent organisation and they presented this as a *precondition* for broadening out to the Australian community. On behalf of the Provisional Committee, Savas Savides proposed the pursuit of five key goals for the new organisation: to provide free English language classes; to form a committee for the support of the unemployed in order to assist them in their search for jobs; to provide welfare aid; to assist in completing English language forms and translating documents; to develop cooperative links with the general population of Australian workers. Despite emphasising the importance of establishing links with the Australian workers, the initial priority was to be placed on developing organisational

self-sufficiency and independence (GM, 4 October 1957). Writing for the *Australian Left Review* in 1971, Mick Tsounis, one of the founders of Platon and a long time active member, maintained:

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 the workers' clubs (Tsounis, 1971:54).

Tsounis' reading of the role of the Greek-Australian Left draws our attention to life in Australia and the transnational struggles of the Greek people as equally important sites of activism. To be sure, alongside the other workers' leagues, Platon took a very active role in supporting the people of Greece and Cyprus in their independence, democracy and anti-junta struggles with letters of protest to the Menzies Government, with fundraising activities for the victims of aggression and political persecution and with support for the visits to Australia by Greek and Cypriot international campaigners (GM, August 1964; GM, November 1964; GM, February 1965; EC, April 1970). Even so, the historical record suggests that to represent the Greek-Australian *communities* as the Left activists' main "field of operation" and the workers' leagues as the "agencies" operating in the former is to present a rather distorted picture. For one thing it makes an anomaly out of the position of an admittedly small number of Greek-Australian community activists who sought to integrate their involvement in the workers' leagues with involvement in the wider Australian community including trade unions, women's and peace organisations (Milides, 1993; Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004:227–256). As we hope to show in this paper, Tsounis' reading gives insufficient weight to the workers' leagues' practice of weaving together their desire (a) to enact the principle of collective self-determination and (b) to function as a part of the wider Australian political community. By representing the workers' leagues primarily as "agencies through which the Greek left" operated in "Greek ethnic communities" Tsounis' account seems to underestimate the extent to which these organisations functioned as "fields of operation" *in their own right*; they were sites for the cultivation of individual members' appreciation of the importance of becoming an integral part of Australian political life in so far as the workers' leagues were themselves constructed as a part of the *Australian* political community. In what follows we try to show that underpinning the first of the two goals that Tsounis identifies, the Platon founders cultivated a sense of belonging amongst the members of the workers' leagues as a *precondition* for their integration in the Australian Left movement and its traditional areas of involvement, the trade union and labour movements, as well as the emerging social movements of the time.

## First steps: from common interests to common spaces

The first item on the agenda of the new association was to celebrate the establishment of Platon. According to the minutes of the Provisional Executive Committee elected by the Platon inaugural meeting, the first activities to be planned were of an informal social and introductory nature. They included a party and a picnic for the members and their families but invitations were also extended to representatives from a number of trade unions. The railway and postal workers' unions were amongst those who accepted. Others responded by letter praising the club's aims and stressing the importance of encouraging Greek migrant workers to join and become active in their unions (PEC, 10 October 1957). To a greater or lesser extent the activities of the trade unions with which the league developed links at the social level also provided the occasion, not merely to promote the unionisation of Greek migrant workers, but also to educate them with respect to their interests as *Australian* workers. This was the case at the height of the unemployment crisis of 1961 (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2007a), when the league undertook to translate and disseminate union material in response to requests for assistance by the engineering and sheet metal workers' unions (AEU, 29 June 1961; SMWIU, 22 August 1961). Similarly, when the Secretary of the Federated Ironworkers' Union addressed a Platon Executive Committee meeting seeking assistance to communicate with non-unionised Greek migrant workers the Committee decided to circulate an issue of the league's newsletter, *Ergatika Nea* highlighting its own understanding of the benefits of unionisation for migrant workers (EC, February 1966).

Within a couple of years of the league's formation Platon was indeed promoting itself to the Greek-Australian community as facilitating the participation of Greek migrant workers in the Australian trade union and labour movements. According to a spread in *Neos Kosmos*, Platon aimed "to meet the needs of the Greek workers of Adelaide, to guide them in the resolution of the problems they face in their everyday lives, to assist them to adapt to the conditions of their new homeland and, generally, to point them in the right direction as far as their interests as workers go" (*Neos Kosmos*, 25 November 1959). Here Platon appealed to the fact that the large majority of Greek migrants were workers. Greek migrant workers needed to be informed about the impact of the laws relating to their rights and obligations and this explained why the organisation needed to establish close links with Australian trade union and labour movements which had the capacity to improve the plight of migrants (*Neos Kosmos*, 25 November 1959). In all areas of involvement and activity the record reveals a persistence with fostering awareness amongst the membership of the lines of continuity between the league's internal life and the organised community in the wider Australian context. The cultivation of the members' awareness of their position as *Australian* residents, workers and citizens took various forms. Characteristically, funds raised from one "family night" were donated to injured seasonal workers in the fruit industry (EC, February 1969). On another occasion the funds from a theatre

performance went towards a campaign to introduce Greek language learning into the Australian public school system (EC, August 1969). To be sure, not all activities were oriented to directing the membership outwardly towards the wider Australian community. The numerous recreational activities that became a regular part of the life of the association warranted their own dedicated organising committee. They included volleyball teams (1964), musical groups (1968) and theatre groups (1969). Still, the major social events, such as the Platon Ball for which up to 500 tickets would be printed, also served as occasions for making links with the wider Australian community (EC, September 1965).

In these formative years active membership was comparatively high with some 30 to 40 members taking part in the general meetings that determined organisational priorities. A number of well attended dedicated sub-committees were also in operation and members were notified of activities through *Ergatika Nea*. By the early 1960s the league's membership had reached 150 (Platon, 31 January 1963). But until 1965 Platon activities were restricted by the fact that, unlike the workers' leagues in Melbourne and Sydney which had secured their own clubrooms, Platon operated out of the Balali *καφενείο* (coffee house). On the question of finances, the inaugural meeting had decided that donations to the organisation would be welcome from those who could afford to make them but following the league's commitment to the principle of mutual aid, all assistance to migrants was to be provided free of charge. From the outset then, like the membership fee that took into account the gendered wage system, funds for services and activities were raised with sensitivity to individuals' circumstances (GM, 4 October 1957). A fundraising committee operated from 1962 but the great majority of contributions came in the form of voluntary work. It was not until the middle of 1964 that the task of purchasing premises was placed high on the Executive Committee's agenda. Some of the members offered interest-free loans to support the purchase of the clubrooms and by the time of the General Meeting of October 1965 the President took pride in announcing that the Waymouth Street premises were to become *το μελλοντικό μας σπίτι* (our future home). The time had come for league members to imagine the full unfolding of their education and welfare program.

## Education and welfare

The 1964 Annual General Meeting had resolved to provide members with free of charge assistance in completing taxation returns but had postponed the introduction of English language classes until after the purchase of clubrooms. Classes began in 1966 thanks to the dedication of voluntary time by the bilingual members who would act as teachers. The high priority placed on fostering a culture of self-education was further reinforced with a decision in 1966 to set up a lending library to be run by and for the members (EC, December 1966). Practical difficulties notwithstanding, within the first six months of the Platon library's operation, the patrons numbered 44 (GM, June 1967).

High on the following year's agenda was the establishment of regular viewings of films with broad educational appeal. Films were borrowed from various sources but to support an ongoing program the league eventually subscribed to a film lending service (GM, June 1969). Prior to the establishment of the clubrooms the league had held information evenings on topics of interest, including the Australian political parties' pre-election programs (*Ergatika Nea*, November 1963; GM, October 1966) and developments in the international peace movement (Platon, 20 March 1963) From 1966, once the league's premises were established, league members planned a regular film and lecture series drawing upon a wide range of speakers (EC, October 1966). The first lecture of the 1967 series commenced with a journalist who reported his experiences on his return from Vietnam. Don Dunstan spoke on "Political Structures and the Economy" (EC, March 1967). Michael Tsounis gave a talk titled "The Migrant Worker" (*Ergatika Nea*, August 1967). Drawing on their areas of expertise, league members spoke on topics such as "Greek poetry during the German occupation" and "A practical guide to the law" (EC, June 1967). One evening was devoted to a "Celebration of Greek resistance to Mussolini" (EC, November 1967). Another focused on "Socialism and Communism" (EC, April 1968). A local pharmacist was invited to speak on "Health issues" (EC, April 1969). Stratis Mavrantonis concluded one series with a talk on "The life and work of Mikis Theodorakis" at which he also read a message from the exiled composer (EC, November 1969). A number of members devoted many hours of voluntary work to developing the programs, given the high priority placed on the *κοινοτική μόρφωση* (social education) of members (GM, June 1967). Whereas one or two members of the Executive Committee would be charged with the responsibility of overseeing the organisation of the monthly film viewings and evening lectures, all members were encouraged to use the league's notice board for sharing noteworthy news items that they came across in the local and international papers and journals (EC, February 1967).

The breadth of topics addressed and the ways and means of the development of the league's educational program attest to the cultivation of a Greek-Australian cultural space that was neither inward looking and fearful of interventions from a threatening outside world nor aspiring to conform to the expectations of perceived outside authorities. Moreover, the internal life of Platon mirrored that of the workers' leagues in other cities with which Platon worked closely throughout its formative years. The workers' leagues shared resources, arranged interstate performances of their respective theatre groups and shared the costs of hosting international speakers (EC, March 1965; EC, June 1966). Perhaps the most explicit expressions of mutual aid came in the form of financial support for each other at critical moments. So, for example, Platon sought financial support for the establishment of the Platon premises from the *αδελφές οργανώσεις* (sister organisations) (EC, January 1966; EC, March 1967). Significantly, this form of assistance was not limited to the Greek organisations. The metalworkers' and the transport workers' unions were also amongst the contributors to the cost of purchasing the Platon premises (EC, December 1965; EC, January 1966).

From 1961 Platon representatives played an active role at the national conferences that the workers' leagues held to discuss common problems and develop common strategies and plans of action, and Platon took part in the establishment of the Federation of Greek-Australian Workers' Leagues in 1965 (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004:245–247). Petros Topalsavas, a long-time Platon member, recalls the enthusiasm with which Platon's delegate to the Sydney Federation conference returned:

Pipinias represented Platon at the workers' leagues' conference in Sydney. On his return he brought back a small frame containing a drop of water. It symbolised the commencement of the Greek-Australian labour movement's struggles. Pipinias conveyed to us the conference's great enthusiasm for the workers' leagues' programs (Topalsavas, 7 April 1999).

The development of close ties with labour, peace, women's and youth organisations both nationally and internationally was an ongoing concern. Another was to develop cooperative links with other Greek community organisations, most notably, the Greek Orthodox Community of South Australia (GOCSA), on issues of common concern (EC, February 1968). Although Greek language education came to be one of the main issues of common concern, Platon also encouraged the GOCSA to support the migrants' citizenship rights campaign of the 1960s, which was itself based on the development of strong inter-ethnic collaboration (GM, Feb 1965; EC, August 1969).

## **Migrant rights, the union, labour and social movements**

The 1960s gave rise to a broad based community campaign for the rights of migrants which involved not only migrant and ethnic communities on a national scale but also their labour movement supporters (Lopez, 2000:131–155). The problem of the denial of residency and naturalisation to peace and labour movement activists and their protection from deportation on political grounds was one of the main concerns (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2007b). In Adelaide Platon protested by letter to the Immigration Department for its refusal to grant citizenship to Steve Pappas, a Platon member and long-time activist (Platon, 26 February 1962). The 1964 General Meeting resolved to call a meeting of representatives from unions and other organisations with a view to forming a committee for the promotion of the rights of migrants. Platon members were also at the forefront of efforts to ensure that the promotion of Greek language teaching in Australian public schools became a major concern within the Adelaide Committee for the Rights of Migrants (*The Advertiser*, 11 September 1968; EC, October 1968; EC, November 1968). Indeed when the national Left Action Conference was held in 1969 Platon resolved to send representatives in the interests of putting migrant issues, such as the teaching of the Greek language in public schools, on the agenda of the Australian Left (GM, March 1969).

Platon sought to build an organisational and communication network whose reach extended both inwardly towards its membership and the wider Greek-Australian

community and outwardly towards other minorities and the organisations of the Anglophone society. The Platon *Ergatika Nea* shows that Platon was always very active in the organisation of May Day Celebrations, not simply by encouraging Greek workers to take part in marches, but also by organising May Day and Labour Day dances in conjunction with the trade union committees. With equal enthusiasm and dedication, Platon members sent £25 to support the striking Mt Isa miners in 1965 (GM, February 1965; EC, March 1965) and they formed an *εργατική επιτροπή* (industrial committee) to co-ordinate support for their own local workers' industrial action that culminated in the 1969 Rubber Mills strike under the leadership of the Miscellaneous Workers Union President, Nick Robakis, who was also a Platon member (GM, November 1969). In addition to raising funds for the Rubber Mills strikers (EC, November 1969), the Platon industrial committee also arranged for letters of protest to be sent to the government and it circulated a petition expressing concern at the neglect of migrant workers' rights (GM, November 1969). It is particularly noteworthy that the committee's membership included John Lesses, labour movement activist and future Secretary of South Australia's Trades and Labour Council, whose achievements included a longstanding commitment to fostering strong links between the Platon members and the wider Australian trade union and labour movements.

A second member of the industrial committee, Steve Pappas, also promoted links between Platon and the wider Australian peace movement in which he had participated from the 1930s. Platon became an affiliate of the Council for International Co-operation and Disarmament (CICD) in 1962 (CICD, 19 July 1962) and its representatives took part in the meetings and activities of South Australia's CICD Committee. League members regularly participated in peace marches and sent delegates to national peace conferences. They also played a significant role in raising public awareness against the Menzies government's conscription campaign and voiced strong opposition to Australian and US involvement in the Vietnam war (GM, 1964; EC, March 1965).

Although there were a number of leading activists who advanced what we have referred to as the outwardly directed aspects of Platon's work, perhaps the figure that best symbolises this orientation is Kay Alexiou. As an Executive Committee member throughout Platon's formative years, Alexiou's dedication to the advancement of the league's aims and objectives is particularly noteworthy for its multiple dimensions. One of these dimensions was the promotion of Indigenous peoples' sovereignty rights through fostering links between Platon and the activities of the Aboriginal Advancement League with which Platon had affiliated from 1962 (AAL, 11 May 1962). Another was the cultivation of awareness within Platon of the position of migrant women in Australia's gendered society. With the establishment of a women's committee, the women of Platon sought to foster vital links to Australian women's organisations and through these to the struggles of women internationally (*Ergatika Nea*, November 1963; AGM, 1964; EC, August 1969).

## Conclusion

Throughout the 1960s then, Platon members volunteered their time, energies and skills in order to create a shared public space as defined by the fundamental values of mutual aid and collective self-determination. In a variety of ways, which included social gatherings, cultural and educational events and facilities, welfare support and the establishment of strong links with the Australian trade union, labour, women's and peace movements, from its inception Platon fostered awareness amongst its membership of the lines of continuity between the internal life of the organisation and the wider Australian society. In doing so it not only made a unique contribution to the life of Adelaide's Greek-Australian community but it also played an important role in shaping Greek-Australian migrants' awareness of their social position, rights and responsibilities, as Australian residents, workers and citizens. In this respect the league cultivated a sense of belonging amongst its members that served as a precondition for their involvement in the life of the Australian Left.

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