

## GREEK UNIONISTS IN AUSTRALIAN TRADE UNIONS

*To the memory of Con Zaglanikes,  
Vehicle Builders Union Organiser*

Documents show that most of the many thousands of Greek people who migrated to Australia after the Second World War were unskilled workers. They obtained employment in Australia as labourers and industrial workers. It was not long, however, before a number of Greek migrants realised that they had to join trade unions as organisers in order to work towards the improvement of employment conditions and employment services, not only for the Greek migrants but for all migrant workers.

This paper examines the employment conditions under which Greek migrants worked in Australia, the government industrial policies towards them, the changing attitudes of the Australian trade unions towards migrants, and the role which Greek unionists played in creating changes of union attitudes towards migrants.

The paper also examines the relevant literature that has been written about Greek unionists in Australia in order to:

- a) examine whether there is a balance between, on one side, the contribution made by Greek unionists to Australian trade unions and further to Australian society, and on the other side the amount of literature written about their contribution;
- b) create a theoretical basis as to why research needs to be carried out on a topic such as this paper presents;
- c) analyse and evaluate the impact of the presence of Greek unionists in Australian trade unions.

Another aspect of the paper is the use of primary sources such as writings and interviews by Greek unionists (Greek men and Greek women unionists), as well as the analysis and evaluation of these sources. Thus the paper blends social and industrial history, personal testimonies, and theoretical and scientific evaluation in attempting to

show that in the history of work in Australia, Greek men and women unionists have played an important shaping role.

This paper is divided into five sections in order to follow the chronological development of Australian society in relation to the trade union movement from about the Second World War to the 1980s. The topics are:

1. The employment of Greek migrants in Australia
2. Attitudes of trade unions towards the first migrants
3. The first Greek trade union organisers
4. The Greek Workers Leagues in Australia
5. The first Migrant Workers' Conference
6. Conclusions.

I have interviewed three Greek-Australian trade unionists for information: Mr George Philopoulos and Mrs Effie Papadopoulou of the Clothing Union, and Mr George Zangalis of the Railways Union.

I feel that I must stress that this paper was not easy to write because currently there are no up-to-date studies or bibliographies on this specific topic. Interviews with some unionists, however, provided invaluable information based on their first hand experiences.

### 1. *The employment of Greek migrants in Australia*

The migration of Greek people to Australia dates back to the early decades of the last century as is revealed by Hugh Gilchrist, former Australian ambassador to Greece (Gilchrist, 1988). By 1940 there were about 15,000 Greeks in Australia and by 1950, just before the mass migration programme from Greece to Australia started, there were 30,000 Greek migrants in Australia (Price, 1975). The mass migration period began in 1953. By 1986 about 200,000 Greeks had migrated to Australia (V.E.A.C., 1987: 9). The actual number of Greeks in Australia at the moment is a controversial issue. Anastasios Tamis speaks of 317,000 (Tamis, 1988: 68), whereas Michael Tsounis speaks of 450,000 (Tsounis, 1988: 16). Whatever the actual number of Greeks in Australia, all researchers seem to agree at least about the conditions of employment for Greek migrants.

The conditions of employment for Greek migrants during the Second World War are described in an interview of the now aged

journalist Dimitris Kalomiris. The interview is mainly concerned with the extermination of the first known Greek-Australian trade unionist, Andreas Raftopoulos, in Sydney in 1941. However, Kalomiris refers also to the employment conditions at that time:

Things were difficult for the whole of society and they were equally difficult for the Greek community. Many people were unemployed, some had shops, coffee shops, restaurants, fruit shops, fish shops. In these shops a lot of Greeks worked as dishwashers. The job was hard, the hours long. They worked from dawn until late at night, seven days a week, for two or three pounds a week. (*Chronico*, 1989: 12; my translation)

Hence employment conditions were usually among the worst possible for the large number of Greek unskilled workers. An example of the categories of occupations which migrants held during the years 1967 to 1968 is given by Des Storer:

*Categories of Migrants' Occupations during 1967 to 1968*  
(Storer, 1974: 5)

Origin	Professional administration	Skilled	Semi-skilled	Unskilled
Canada	43.8%	18.6%	25.2%	9.4%
USA	51.0	17.2	24.0	7.8
New Zealand	39.0	26.9	26.9	8.2
UK and Eire	19.6	34.4	35.4	10.6
Germany	14.0	44.3	25.0	16.7
Netherlands	18.4	38.6	31.0	12.0
Malta	11.1	22.6	20.7	45.6
Italy	7.2	32.0	11.1	49.7
Greece	5.9	11.1	7.1	75.9
Yugoslavia	3.4	20.9	11.3	64.4
Total	16.8	30.7	25.9	29.6

According to Des Storer these figures show how the Southern Europeans worked in unskilled and semi-unskilled occupations whereas Anglo-Saxon and Northern European immigrants worked in professional and skilled occupations. Furthermore Storer notes that a

1966 study of poverty in Melbourne found that 16.2% Greeks, 15.3% Italians and 9.2% British lived below the poverty line compared to 7.7% of the population as a whole. With regards to unemployment, the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed in its figures in 1971 that while 1.1% of Australian born males over 20 were unemployed, there were 4.8% Yugoslavs, 3.9% Greeks and 2.5% Italians who were unemployed. Almost twenty years later the figures of the ABS showed that immigrants were still suffering from unemployment, only this time in higher numbers: in July 1986 the unemployment rate for the Greek-born in the state of Victoria was 12.8% compared to 7.7% for the Australian-born in Victoria (V.E.A.C., 1987: 24).

A more detailed view of working conditions for migrants during the 60s and 70s is given in an interview by Con Zanglas (Zaglanikes in Greek),<sup>1</sup> a Greek unionist in the Vehicle Builders Union:

*Epaphe*: Con, how have you been involved with migrant workers?

*Zanglas*: As a migrant who had to fend for himself in a new country since the age of 13 I've met many thousands of migrants especially in the car industry where I worked for 11 years, during which I gained experience as a Union steward, regarding conditions of work, especially pressures on the production lines, and also as a full-time Union official. In the last 12 years, I have been in a position to know something about the needs of workers generally, and the needs and disadvantages of migrants.

[...]

*Epaphe*: Under what conditions do migrants work? How are they treated in the workforce and what is the basis for these attitudes to them?

[...]

*Zanglas*: All big business, especially the multi-national corporations, are using very capable and very trained people in charge of industrial relations, who are ruthless and take advantage of the disadvantages of migrant workers and use psychological pressure, victimisation and discrimination to maintain an oppressive atmosphere in the places of work in

<sup>1</sup>Con Zanglas (1923-1988) came to Australia at the age of thirteen from the island of Kithyra. He was an organiser with the Vehicle Builders Union in Melbourne.

order to squeeze every last cent out of the workers who are under constant fear of the sack. This is why they often insist in dismissing workers for next to nothing. Often they even refuse to give a reason for such dismissals and fight tooth and nail to carry out the dismissals in spite of Union objections. [...]

To a migrant a dismissal means more than losing a job, which is a severe enough blow. In most cases it also means humiliation. I've seen migrants break down and cry because of this. The greater the pressure, the greater the profits. It's no exaggeration to say that the most elementary human rights are being violated in the places of work especially those owned by the multi-nationals. There's no limit to their thirst for profit. Pressures on the production lines of Ford, Broadmeadows have been the reasons for the anger often expressed by the workers during disputes such as the one in 1974 that ended in a riot. (*Epaphe* 1983: 21- 22;<sup>2</sup> my translation)

This testimony of Con Zanglas is descriptively revealing about not only the terrible employment conditions under which migrants worked for many years but also the inhumanity and cruelty of the employment conditions of migrants in Australia.

For an overall perspective about the working lives of Greek men and women in Australia during the last thirty years I will also refer to the reports of a Greek women's group and of a doctors' group as presented at the first Greek-Australian Conference organised in 1987 by the Victorian Government and the Greek Government. The group of Greek women reported:

NESB [Non-English Speaking Background] women were found in factory jobs that were dirty, heavy, repetitive and underpaid. The situation today has barely changed. They had, and most still have, little knowledge of their rights as workers and were, and still are, easy targets for exploitation. (Andreou *et al.*, 1987: 8)

The doctors reported:

Working in the front line of industry Greeks are exposed to the

<sup>2</sup>*Επαφή* (Contact): student magazine published by the Modern Greek Students Association of the University of Melbourne, 1977-1987.

consequences of dangerous work practices, poor management and a hazardous environment, as are all such workers. However, being largely non-English speaking, Greeks are further endangered by inadequate or absent safety induction programmes. The lack of language can lead to inappropriate placement of a worker, ignorance by the worker of dangerous practices and situations, and ignorance about safety measures. [...] The inability to speak English and the ignorance of rights and/or of how to ensure those rights renders Greek workers prone to exploitation. They may be asked to enter situations too risky to be generally acceptable. Permission to seek medical treatment may be denied. Access to suitable alternative work may be used to block applications for treatment or adequate remuneration, time off or compensation. (Mesaritis and Constantinou, 1987: 23-24)

It is obvious from the extracts of the above reports, which represent objective testimonies about the problems of the working lives of Greek immigrants, that these migrants have never had it easy during the many years of their employment. Hence the presence of trade unions was of considerable importance for the migrants. But did the unions themselves pay attention to the migrants? This question will be examined and answered in the next section of the paper.

## 2. Attitudes of Australian trade unions towards the first migrants

According to the majority of testimonies which exist, the attitude of the Australian trade unions towards the first migrant workers was a negative one. This negative attitude probably lasted from the Second World War until 1973 when the first Migrant Workers Conference took place in Melbourne. I will discuss the conference in another section of my paper. In this section I will examine the existing testimonies about the above mentioned attitude.

Professor Jupp in 1966 stated that "Very few unions have the resources or inclination to employ European officials" (Jupp, 1966: 60-61). That the statement of Professor Jupp is not far from reality is shown by the interviews I conducted with Mr. George Philopoulos of the Clothing Union and Mr. George Zangalis of the Railways Union. Mr. Philopoulos stated that he was the first Greek unionist to be employed by a Victorian trade union and that was as late as 1963. Mr.

Zangalis stated that the Secretary of the Vehicle Builders Union did not even want to write a leaflet in the Greek language in the 60s. Hence, to employ a Greek unionist would have probably been like a revolution to this union secretary.

Another incident similar to the one described above by Mr. Zangalis took place in 1958. According to Lever-Tracy and Quinlan:

In 1958, the AWU's [Australian Workers Union's] immigrant organiser, J. Bielski, asked the union's national conference to publish more foreign language material in *The Worker*. This move was rejected. The Queensland branch secretary, J. Bukowski, labelled immigrant canecutters as award breakers and stated, "It is time they learnt our ways", (*SMH [Sydney Morning Herald]*, 23 January 1958). Soon after Bielski was dismissed from his post. (Lever-Tracy and Quinlan, 1988: 137)

The negative attitude towards the migrants came not only from the trade unions but from the whole of the Anglo-Saxon society, said Mr. Philopoulos in the interview. His words are also revealing:

In 1954, when I came to Australia, I found a situation which was tragic for the migrants. They [the Anglo-Saxons] were looking at migrants with a hostile eye; as people who came here to take away their jobs, to make their life difficult, to intrude in their internal affairs. I found that there was an establishment which did not permit any infiltration. Of course, if you became aware of that establishment you entered into a struggle to break it. If you didn't enter into such a struggle you became the victim [...] and sometimes people ended up in psychiatric wards because they had not realised the meaning of the situation; that you, yourself, had to fight for change, in order not to become a victim. (G. Philopoulos, interview; my translation)

The truth of Mr. Philopoulos's claims is validated by the social scientist June Hearn who wrote in 1975:

There have been no formal agreements or awards to limit or fix the proportion of migrant workers in any industry nor it seems any official union applications for such. But there have been some serious misgivings on the part of some unions over the possibility of Australians being "crowded out". In 1952 the Clothing Trades Union considered the desirability of

fixing a minimum quota of employment for "New Australians in any one factory" of 25% for those who had been in Australia less than five years. The Unions submitted that in some factories the proportion of migrants was as high as 95%. (Hearn, 1975: 67)

Another observation that we can derive from the activities of the Greek workers clubs, such as "Democritus" in Melbourne, is that it was these organizations that first made the pleas to trade unions for consideration of Greek workers; one would have thought that the unions should have been the first to contact these organizations to enlighten workers about their rights and about trade unionism. But they did not. On the contrary, unions too were at times hostile to immigrant workers and at times indifferent to their problems. These observations are derived from many testimonies such as the following:

(a) In *For a Better Life We Came ...*, Mr. Andreas Kyriakou, a Greek-Cypriot migrant states:

We had formed a work[ers'] committee [in the Democritus Association in 1955] that was going to enlighten the workers about workers issues. I remember I was voted one of the members of the working committee. Immediately I invited different unionists from various trade unions to come and give a talk at "Democritus" about the purpose of trade unions. (Kyriakou, 1985: 16)

(b) Both Mr. Philopoulos and Mr. Zangalis were also members of the "Democritus" Workers Club and they also stated in their interviews that they organised themselves in "Democritus" in order to strengthen their positions as immigrant workers in their activities to protect workers' rights and in their contacts with Australian trade unions, as they realised that the unions had not paid enough attention to migrants.

(c) A social scientist, Petro Georgiou, conducted a study about migrants and unions after interviewing, in 1969, a number of Greek migrant workers. He wrote in that study: "Migrants constitute a largely unknown, and hence an often mistrusted element of the Australian trade union movement" (Georgiou, 1973: 32). Hence, Georgiou also found that the trade unions had a negative stance towards migrant workers.

(d) Lever-Tracy and Quinlan, two other social scientists, write about the Greek workers clubs of the 1960s:

Their efforts to build a firm bridge between Greek immigrants and the indigenous working class, and encourage greater immigrant involvement in unions met with less success. Even sympathetic unions made only limited efforts to foster immigrant participation in their operations. Many unions remained hostile to the politics of Greek worker clubs and suspicious of independent immigrant worker organization. (Lever-Tracy and Quinlan, 1988: 152)

(e) The anthropologist Gillian Bottomley, while noting the importance of the existence of the Greek workers clubs, also notes that the strength of the Sydney based Greek Workers Club "Atlas" was negatively influenced by the "Australian disinterest in the problems of migrant workers". Bottomley's analysis of the existence of the Greek workers clubs is also revealing about the influence that these workers clubs managed to have on Australian trade unions. This influence can be extracted from the following analysis:

The *workers clubs* have more specific aims than the Brotherhoods and Communities. The first workers club in Sydney, Platon (established 1932) was succeeded in 1939 by the present Atlas Club. The affiliated Lambrakis Youth League and the Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Greece actively campaigned against the Papodopoulos regime, but political attitudes vary on other issues. [...] Atlas has effectively championed some of the Greek causes overseas, activating the Australian Left on the Cyprus issue, harassing supporters of the military junta by encouraging boycotts of Greek ships in Australian ports, and raising large sums of money for the families of political prisoners in Greece.

The potential strength of Atlas has been curtailed by anti-communism among Greeks and Australians, by dissension within the leftist groups, and by Australian disinterest in the problems of migrant workers. Like the Community of N.S.W, Atlas is predominantly an association of first generation migrants. (Bottomley, 1979: 61)

We could therefore conclude that the influence achieved by the Greek workers clubs on the Australian trade unions was a result of the Greek workers clubs' support and solidarity towards the unions. This conclusion is also revealed in a Greek unionist's account of how he managed to defeat the union hostility towards him for being a

“political activist migrant worker” and on how he finally became a union organiser. This account was given to the social scientist June Hearn:

You must be wondering how the hell they (Australian union officials) put up with me. Let me tell you, they fought me every inch of the way. I am too militant for them. I would never have got here if it hadn't been for all the work over the years among the rank and file; we (he and his political colleagues) organized meetings, distributed leaflets and set up a rank-and-file committee. Without the mass support we built up, I'd never have been successful. It's tough working with the bastards but it has to be done. I owe it to those who put me here. (Hearn, 1980: 157-158)

It is thus clear that both researchers and people who witnessed the social developments of the last fifty years agree that the Australian trade unions had a negative attitude towards immigrant workers between 1940 and 1973 (this date will be explained in the section which will deal with the first Migrant Workers Conference). Therefore, the same unions did not make any effort to employ migrant unionists. My attention will therefore turn to the emergence of the first Greek union organisers.

### 3. *The first Greek union organisers*

According to the journalist Dimitri Kalomiris, who lived in Australia during the depression and the Second World War, the first Greek unionist in Australia was Andreas Raftopoulos. This unionist was in 1940 one of the founders of the first Greek Workers Association called “Atlas”. Mr. Kalomiris says about Andreas Raftopoulos:

Things were difficult in society [...] and the Communist Party of Australia together with the Restaurant Employees Union in 1941 asked Greek left wing workers to organise a Greek branch in the Union with the aim to work for better working conditions for the Greek workers in the restaurants. It was like asking you to bring lions from Africa. The pitiful Greeks that worked in restaurants were falling on their knees and pleading so that a Greek employer would give them work to wash dishes. It was unthinkable for them to enter into a struggle for better employment conditions and wages. None dared to speak about wages. [...]

[...] Raftopoulos was working himself from morning until evening, seven days a week, in his brother-in-law's restaurant for three pounds a week. He left his job and became an organiser in the Restaurant Employees Union to organise the Greek workers. It was the first time that a Greek person became officially an organiser of the Union to organise the Greek workers. Andreas Raftopoulos was a good organiser and made people enthusiastic. He managed to organise a lot of Greek workers. And it should be noted that, in the union elections that took place then, the conservative leadership was defeated and progressive unionists became elected. This was a result of the many Greeks joining the Union. (*Chronico*, 1989: 12-13; my translation)

Ironically, however, the first Greek unionist in Australia was exterminated at a young age by the Greek establishment of the time. Kalomiris states:

In the small Greek community of Sydney, Raftopoulos became a target of hatred, threats and persecution. The employers were threatening that they would send him to jail or deport him. The Greek Consulate also participated in these threats against him. The Communist Party in which he was a member was illegal at the time. [...] In an atmosphere of tension and crisis Andreas Raftopoulos was like a stretched wire in his youth. He was about thirty then. They broke his nerves. One night he went upstairs to relax. That was it. He cut the veins of his throat with a razor. They found him in a pool of blood. (*Chronico*, 1989: 15; my translation).

Thus ended in tragedy the life Andreas Raftopoulos, the first Greek unionist in Australia.

According to George Philopoulos, the first elected unionist in Australia was a Greek migrant named Karatzas. Karatzas was elected in 1960 as president of the Railways Union in Adelaide. George Philopoulos himself, according to his interview, was the first Greek unionist to be employed by the Clothing Union in Victoria, in 1963, in order to organise the Greek workers in the clothing industry.

The other two unionists I have interviewed became union organisers during later years. Mr George Zangalis was elected in the Victorian Railways Union in 1975. Mrs. Effie Papadopoulous was

employed by the Clothing Union in 1987. However, she was elected to the executive of the same union in 1975.

As a result of my research I have found that the unionist Con Zaglanikes of the Vehicle Builders Union was the first migrant unionist to be elected as an organiser in the state of Victoria.

One common characteristic shared by George Philopoulos, George Zangalis and Con Zaglanikes is the fact that they all became active members of the “Democritus” Greek Workers League before they became active in the trade union movement. This shows that the Greek Workers League was a pro-union organisation and that the “Democritus” Greek migrants did not respond in a hostile manner to the hostile attitude shown towards them by the trade unions. They responded with a more responsible attitude in order not to create a split among the workers of Australia, a split that could have separated workers into migrants versus Anglo-Saxons.

#### 4. *The Greek Workers Leagues in Australia*

The Greek Workers Leagues (referred to by many researchers as Clubs instead of Leagues) were set up in Australia’s major cities both before the Second World War and after it. According to the social scientist Michael Tsounis, the original reasons for their establishment were as follows:

A branch of the Greek seamen’s union was formed on Greek ships, which were caught here by the war and subsequently chartered by the Australian government. The war, the Greek Civil War which followed it and the entry of Greeks into factories, stimulated the formation of workers’ clubs. (Tsounis, 1975: 41)

Each of these workers clubs was registered as “a Greek Workers League” (“Ελληνικός Εργατικός Σύνδεσμος”); in Melbourne, “Democritus” (established in 1935); in Sydney, “Atlas” (established in 1939); in Adelaide, “Platon” (established in 1957); in Newcastle, “Socrates” (established in the 1940s); and in Brisbane, “Palamas”, (established in the 1940s).

From my own research I have also found that the Greek workers clubs that were established before the war in Melbourne and Sydney

were originally set up by Greek seamen, and as Tsounis notes, all the clubs had left wing political lines (Tsounis, 1971: 54). After the war, as more and more Greek migrants arrived in Australia the Greek workers clubs acted as social welfare providers to the Greek migrants who felt lost in their new and unknown homeland. This was a very important role that they originally played.

As the thousands of Greek migrants entered factories as workers, the Greek workers clubs turned their attention to migrant workers’ rights as well as community, social and political issues such as the violation of human rights in Greece during several dictatorships and the restoration of democracy in Greece. The activities of the Greek workers clubs in the 1950s through to the 1970s are described by Lever-Tracy and Quinlan:

By the early 1960s more or less permanent Greek worker clubs were operating in most cities. They attempted to politicise Greek immigrants and induce community action on the housing, social welfare, employment and language problems of immigrants. Contact with the indigenous labour movement was generally restricted to left-wing unions in the building, metal and maritime industries. The clubs’ most significant early achievement was to elicit demonstrations of solidarity (such as the imposition of shipping bans) with regard to the gaoling, trial and execution of unionists, communists and other radical activists in Greece (Tsounis, 1971: 56-57; LCNSW [Labour Council of New South Wales] minutes 2 September, 1948 and 14 August, 1952). (Lever-Tracy and Quinlan, 1988: 152)

The concern of the Greek workers clubs for the Greek migrants as well as for the strengthening of ties between Greek migrant workers and Australian trade unions could also be demonstrated by the fact that the first migrant trade unionists in Australia came from the ranks of the Greek workers clubs. A good example of this fact is the case of Melbourne based unions. According to June Hearn the presence of migrant union officials in unions in 1971 was as follows:

*Migrant Union Officials 1971–72*  
(Hearn, 1980: 151)

Union	Nationality	Age	Years of Service	Status
Clothing and Allied Trades (2)	Greek	39	7	Organiser
Ironworkers (2)	Greek	36	3.5	Interpreter-Organiser
	Maltese	53	13	Organiser (Vice-President)
Liquor Trades (1)	Italian	41	6	Interpreter-Compensation Officer
	Greek-Cypriot	43	1.5	Organiser
Pastrycooks & Biscuitmakers (1)	Pole	48	5	Secretary
Storemen & Packers (1)	Maltese	32	2	Organiser
Vehicle Builders (1)	Greek	46	1	Organiser
Group of Unions (1)	Italian	64	15	Interpreter-Compensation Officer

During the period that June Hearn conducted her study there were 300 union officials in Victoria representing 80 different unions. The proportion of migrant union officials compared with others (Australian and British) was three per cent. Notably, of the nine migrant union officials four were Greek migrants. June Hearn also notes the fact that “all nine officials were politically active before taking office and five of them (the two Greeks, the Greek-Cypriot and both Italians) have strong connections with their respective ethnic communities” (Hearn, 1980: 157). This statement finds Mr Philopoulos in agreement and he also adds that all the four Greek unionists were also members of the “Democritus” Greek Workers Club.

The Greek workers clubs thus acted as responsible pro-union organisations promoting unity in the working-class of Australia.

From the above testimonies we can thus conclude that the Greek and Italian workers clubs became popular and grew strong because they were promoting solidarity with the Australian trade unions.

However, the positive attitude of the Greek workers clubs towards the Australian trade unions was not followed by all immigrant workers. The Italian workers clubs had a similar attitude (Lever-Tracy and Quinlan, 1988: 130). According to the same authors:

some immigrants quite deliberately sought a more permanent expression of ethnic exclusivity and one which took on part of the character of trade unions. In 1956 a New Australian Labor Council was established in Sydney, claiming to represent the social and industrial welfare of Eastern European immigrants.

An attempt at organisation more hostile to indigenous unions involved bodies known as the New Citizens’ Council and the Industrial Workers Union of Australia which were both registered under the New South Wales Trade Union Act (on 28 October 1958 and 28 February 1959 respectively) but failed to gain registration under the more important Industrial Arbitration Act. [...] In February 1960, the federal Minister for Immigration, A.R. Downer, publicly condemned the New Citizens’ Council as “utterly unnecessary” and urged immigrants to seek help from existing unions, whose role in integrating immigrants he also praised<sup>3</sup> (*SMH [Sydney Morning Herald]*, 15 February 1960).

By April of the same year the New Citizens’ Council was defunct. (Lever-Tracy and Quinlan, 1988: 127-129)

Contrary to the moves of certain migrant groups to form exclusive unions for migrants as a reaction towards the hostility shown by unions to migrants, the Greek workers clubs insisted on not only trying to break the unions’ hostility towards them but also on convincing Greek workers not to return the same hostility. The clubs tried to convince workers that they must position themselves on the side of all Australian workers as well as on the side of unions.

Regarding the issue of the position of Greek migrants in industrial relations and in Australian society, Kakakios and ven der Velden make the following observations:

<sup>3</sup>An ironically surprising and “unreal” statement when in fact unions at the time paid no attention to migrants.

Thus a salient feature of the 1950s was the emergence of rival definitions concerning the role and function of Greeks within Australia. Leftist perspectives closely identified the interests of the Greek workers with those of other groups in similar economic and political circumstances. From this position it is only a short step to defining Greeks as an integral part of the Australian working-class movement. Conservative perspectives, on the other hand, by emphasising the unique effects of Greek experience, utilised ethnicity as their central point of departure.

Important to the former was the idea that immigrants, like Anglo-Australians, were entitled to certain basic citizenship rights. The left's stress on unity and solidarity with the Australian working-class movement, on the basis of shared industrial work experience and political powerlessness, was an attempt to undermine the foundations of ideologies based on ethnic considerations. By locating Greeks squarely within the established hierarchy of class, it helped to pave the way for strategies aimed towards political participation. These ideas were forcefully expressed by the leftist newspaper *Neos Kosmos*:

"As residents we belong to the Australian society and have every right to take an active part in shaping the policies of the country. We have every right to be critical of the political parties and ask them to account for their position regarding the solution of our problems." (*Neos Kosmos*, Editorial, 16 April 1958, quoted in Holbraad, 1977: 223)

"Workers must not for a moment forget that no matter where they are born all have the same interests." (*Neos Kosmos*, Editorial, 31 May 1961 quoted in Holbraad, 1977: 228).

(Kakakios and van der Velden, 1984: 157)

With regards to the same issue regarding the reaction on behalf of migrants towards the hostility and mistrust shown to them by unions, Mr Philopoulos had the following to say:

*Question*: Could you say that the Greek unionists have influenced Australian unions?

*Philopoulos*: I can say that they did not influence the unions so as to damage or change their course; but at that time they made Australian unions take into consideration the special needs of migrants which were greater than their colleagues

who knew the language and knew all that was needed about their rights. Migrants played a basic role in that area.

However, Australians at that time were chauvinists and did not want migrants in unions. Australian unionists too were at times not better than the employers regarding chauvinism (and of course only to a degree). And this is not my belief. This was the reality. Naturally we cannot say that Australian unionists could stay out of the atmosphere of chauvinism. The migrants therefore played their role because there was a need for them. What I mean is that, at the time when eighty per cent of the workers in manufacturing industry were migrants, the unions had to find a way to organise those people in their ranks. Hence the unions used migrant unionists like myself, like Mr. Zangalis and others, in order to achieve their aim. They did not use migrant unionists for the purpose of fighting for migrant workers' rights. And I doubt whether the union movement has recognised this fact to this very day. However the union movement has made very big steps and has adopted multiculturalism, the teaching of community languages and many other programs which support migrants. (G. Philopoulos, interview; my translation)

It thus becomes very clear that the Greek unionists had very bitter experiences resulting from the attitudes of Australian unions towards them. When, however, the Australian unions realised that they needed them, the Greek unionists put aside their bitterness and helped unions to organise the thousands of migrant workers, thus strengthening the position of Australian unions as well as strengthening the possibilities for improvements in the working and employment conditions of migrant workers and of all Australian working people.

The impact and the contribution which Greek workers clubs (as well as Italian workers clubs) made on unions is given in a revealing three point form by Lever-Tracy and Quinlan:

[...] First, these clubs have chosen to co-operate rather than compete with organised labour. Although their reception has been mixed, their commitment to working within the partisan atmosphere of union and labour politics has always been apparent. Indeed, on occasion their attempt to build closer ties with union leaderships has circumscribed their efforts to mobilize rank and file immigrants during election struggles.

Second, these bodies have played an unabashedly partisan role in union affairs. The older organisations of the 1950s were always drawn to the left-wing of the labour movement in spite of the anti-communist hysteria in Australian politics at that time. This commitment to the left has remained intact. Undoubtedly, this explains the hostility they encountered from some unions—rather than any suspicion that they were “immigrant” unions.

Third, the involvement of these bodies in trade unionism suggests political compatibility rather than a direct interest in industrial relations. Nevertheless, these clubs have performed a tangential industrial role in encouraging immigrant participation in unions, in providing information on workers’ compensation and in policy-making on industrial matters. (Lever-Tracy and Quinlan, 1988: 156-157)

##### 5. *The first Migrant Workers Conference*

In October 1973 the first Migrant Workers Conference was held at the Trades Hall in Melbourne. This conference probably represents a turning point in the history of migrant workers and in the history of migrant participation in trade unions.

The conference was held from 5–7 October and about 200 delegates attended each day. The meetings of the conference were conducted in five languages: English, Italian, Greek, Yugoslav and Spanish.

The document adopted by the conference read:

The Conference on Migrant Workers’ Problems, Melbourne 1973, was convened in response to wide-felt dissatisfaction with the position of migrant workers in the workforce and in Australian society. The Conference agreed that the migrants’ lack of representation in the trade union movement, the poor communications between migrants and their unions and between migrants and their fellow Australian workers, has limited the means by which migrants can make their own particular demands known and has prevented their effective participation in the working class struggle. This has helped allow the continuation of an exploitive and racist immigration policy and the even more vicious exploitation of migrants and especially women migrants by large overseas and Australian monopoly interests. These monopolies have profited immensely from this system to the detriment not only of

migrant and Australian workers but of all the Australian people. It has limited and retarded the struggle of all migrant and Australian unskilled workers against these monopolies and thus weakens the whole working class movement.

The Conference agreed that the Trade Union Movement had the major responsibility to change this situation and has endorsed a comprehensive range of proposals, as set out below, to assist in this process as well as putting forward demands which it was felt the trade union movement should take up, not only just on the behalf of migrant workers, but where appropriate, all workers, especially the unskilled, of which migrants form the major part. (Victorian Trades Hall Council, 1974: 14-15)

The conference represented also a turning point in the manner in which migrants conducted their struggles. So far, in this paper, we have seen that since the 1930s the Greek and Italian workers formed workers clubs in order to defend themselves and to defend their rights to participate in Australian trade unions. We have also seen other migrant groups attempting to form their own unions exclusively for migrants and failing in these attempts because they were misguided.

However, in 1973 the first Migrant Workers Conference did not take place because of some sort of favourable climate in social and trade union attitudes. On the contrary, social and trade union attitudes were still very negative and this is validated by the Melbourne social scientist, June Hearn, who wrote as late as in 1975:

[...] it would be foolish to ignore the negative approach of many unionists as a salient factor discouraging migrant participation. There is much ignorance and neglect, not to mention outright prejudice, among Australian unionists at all levels concerning the situation of the migrant workers in their midst. Replies such as: “I’ve never really thought about it” from unionists in response to questions about the specific problems of migrant workers are common as are accusations of “wog-lover” hurled at those who make deliberate efforts to understand migrant workers. (Hearn, 1975: 69)

Mr George Zangalis spoke also about the unfavourable climate towards immigrant workers that existed still in the 1970s in a speech he gave in 1973, prior to the conference; his speech was later

published. I quote some extracts in order to give Mr. Zangalis's opinion:

Out of the 700 delegates to the last A.C.T.U. Congress [1972] there were 5 non-British migrants! [...]

The fact however is that after 25 years of mass immigration one needs a magnifying glass if one is to find a migrant in the leadership of a union. [...]

All these indicate that something is not going well in the trade union movement.

The involvement of migrant workers in their union is inhibited in my opinion by two factors. Firstly, the unions, in general, consider migrants as an element that is, and will continue to be, of a supporting character, if not a liability until they become assimilated to "our way of thinking", "they become like us". That is a very major factor.

Secondly, many migrants have no working class or trade union experience and background and so take their own time to adjust to a new reality. [...] In the fifties I spent the best part of my time trying to sell the unions to migrant workers, now I have changed my priorities, I try to sell the problems of migrant workers to the unions. Then I am certain we will get somewhere. (Zangalis, 1975: 26-28)

Mr. George Philopoulos's opinion about the conditions of trade union work are similar to those of Mr. Zangalis. However Mr. Philopoulos stresses that although he too believes that the trade unions were not really interested in the migrant workers' problems for a long period of time, he thinks that the trade unions also did not recognise, for a very long time, the contribution which the Greek trade unionists made in organising the migrant workers so that unions in general could be strengthened in their struggles. He gives an example to prove his point. He refers to the fact that in 1963 he took the initiative to publish a trade union newspaper in the Greek language from within the trade union movement. It was the first non-English union newspaper ever to be published in Australia. It is still published and is called *The Unionist*. Over a number of years many trade unions did not offer any support. He says:

In the beginning it was only the trade unions that had overcome the prejudices of discrimination, that supported *The Unionist*. However, would you believe it, until today there are

unions who are not buying it for their Greek members, using the excuse that there aren't even union newspapers written in the English language that have the quality of *The Unionist*, so they are afraid that they may receive complaints. (G. Philopoulos, interview; my translation)

Hence, it is clear from the above that the First Migrant Workers Conference in 1973 was much needed, so that the migrant workers could convey a voice of unity as well as a call for justice. These calls were reflected in the resolutions of the conference which asked for better wages, better working conditions, the recognition of immigrant skills and guaranteed committees, election of migrant organisers, conduct of multilingual education programmes, publication of multilingual information and employment of multilingual office staff. Very important claims were also the demands for English to be taught on the factory floor and for the right of migrants to have their languages and their cultures to be subjects of teaching in Australian schools.

Since 1973 the migrants have gained all these rights. And even in a glossy *Trade Union Information Kit* published in 1987 by the Victorian Trades Hall Council the migrants have a chapter devoted to them. This fair treatment to migrants is definitely a result of the work of migrant unionists of whom Greek unionists were a majority and have made a great contribution to the well-being of all workers in Australia.

## 6. Conclusions

As a result of the hostile conditions which the Greek workers found in Australia, when they first arrived, they formed workers clubs in order to create a common base of action and a common voice for their calls for justice.

In the Greek workers clubs in almost all of Australia's major cities, several people saw the need to bridge their workers' organizations with the Australian trade unions. Although the Australian trade unions did not understand the real problems of the migrant workers, the Greek workers clubs still tried to prove to the trade unions that they were their allies and not their competitors.

Thus, the Greek unionists who were born out of these processes, became the main organisers of the migrant workers. The organization

of migrant workers into the Australian trade unions meant that the unions strengthened their bargaining power and subsequently their struggles for the working class of Australia. What the unions won, not only profited the migrant workers but the whole working class of Australia.

However, I doubt whether the Australian trade union movement and Australian society have fully recognised, up to now, this important contribution to the working people of Australia made by Greek unionists. Let us hope that this will happen in the near future.

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## Γ.Θ. ΒΑΦΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ, Ο ΜΑΚΕΔΟΝΑΣ ΠΟΙΗΤΗΣ ΕΝΤΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΕΚΤΟΣ ΤΩΝ ΚΑΒΑΦΙΚΩΝ ΤΕΙΧΩΝ

Η συγκεντρωτική έκδοση των ποιημάτων του Μακεδόνα ποιητή Γιώργου Θ. Βαφόπουλου, *Άπαντα τα Ποιητικά*,<sup>1</sup> που έγινε το 1990 απ' τον εκδοτικό οίκο Παρατηρητής της Θεσσαλονίκης, περιλαμβάνει μια ποιητική πορεία εξήμισυ δεκαετιών σε οκτώ ποιητικές συλλογές και περισσότερες από 400 σελίδες. Η πρώτη συλλογή, *Τα Ρόδα της Μυρτάλης*, δημοσιεύτηκε το 1931 αλλά περιλαμβάνει ποιήματα γραμμένα απ' το 1924. Ο Γιώργος Θ. Βαφόπουλος γεννήθηκε το 1903 στη Γευγελή του σημερινού κράτους των Σκοπίων, που την περίοδο εκείνη ήταν υπό τουρκική κατοχή. Σε παιδική ηλικία μετακινήθηκε στη Θεσσαλονίκη. Αργότερα σπούδασε μαθηματικά στην Αθήνα. Το 1924 βρίσκεται πάλι στη Θεσσαλονίκη, όπου σε ηλικία 21 χρονών αναλαμβάνει διευθυντής του περιοδικού *Μακεδονικά Γράμματα* και γράφει τα πρώτα του ποιήματα. Αυτός είναι ο χρόνος που αρχίζει η λογοτεχνική του παρουσία, μολονότι η πρώτη του ποιητική συλλογή δημοσιεύτηκε το 1931. Το 1991 κυκλοφόρησε απ' τον Παρατηρητή ο πέμπτος τόμος των *Σελίδων της Αυτοβιογραφίας* του. Έτσι για περισσότερα από 65 χρόνια ο Βαφόπουλος παίζει ενεργό ρόλο στην πνευματική πορεία της Θεσσαλονίκης.

Από τις οκτώ συλλογές η *Προσφορά* (1938) και τα *Αναστάσιμα* (1948) υπολογίζονται ως μία συλλογή γιατί έτσι κυκλοφόρησαν το 1948 με τον τίτλο *Προσφορά και Αναστάσιμα*. Ο συγκεντρωτικός τόμος περιλαμβάνει και τα *Νέα Σατιρικά Γυμνάσματα 1967-1974*, (Βαφόπουλος, 1990: 275-334), 56 πολιτικά και κοινωνικά σατιρικά ποιήματα στο ύφος των *Σατιρικών Γυμνασμάτων* του Κωστή Παλαμά. Κυκλοφόρησαν το 1975 με το ψευδώνυμο Λουκίλιος Γιουβενάλης και αναφέρονται στην περίοδο της στρατιωτικής δικτατορίας στην

<sup>1</sup>Βαφόπουλος, 1990. Όλα τα ποιητικά αποσπάσματα του Βαφόπουλου προέρχονται από αυτό το βιβλίο.