In this paper we offer an account of Greek migrant activists’ struggles to secure citizenship rights in the 1950s and 1960s. Focusing on the collaborative efforts between a number of “national groups” of the times, we will demonstrate how Greek migrant activists, including trade union and peace activists, and their community organisations, initiated the promotion of a broad awareness campaign. This campaign drew upon a notion of active Greek-Australian citizenship to challenge their presumed “perpetual foreigner” position.

Introduction

The dominant view of researchers has been that Australia’s post-war European immigrant communities, such as the Greek communities, were largely absent from the political landscape until after the adoption of official multiculturalism in the early 1970s. For instance, in a recent extensive account of the historical origins of multiculturalism in Australian politics Mark Lopes (2000) claims that migrant communities played no significant role in the political processes that led to the Australian government’s adoption of the policy of multiculturalism. Other work that addresses the political life of the organised Greek-Australian communities has tended to reinforce a view of them as insular and the focus has been on the study of internal community politics (Holbraad, 1977; Tsounis, 1971; and Allimonos, 1992). By comparison, labour historians have acknowledged the active role of Greek migrants in political struggles for better working conditions (Quinlan and Lever-Tracy, 1988) and the more recent work also gives attention

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to migrants’ own experiences of activism and agency (Tierney, 1999). Even so, the researchers’ tendency has been to presume a rather artificial distinction between the Greek migrants’ political work in the workplace and their community organisational networks. Our research into the political history of the Greek-Australian communities shows that when we focus on the outward looking sections of the Greek-Australian communities we discover a richer pattern of connections between these areas of social life (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004a).

In this paper we present some research findings concerning the political activism of Greek-Australians in the 1950s and 1960s. Greek-Australian activists’ stories reveal their complex and integrated understandings of Australian political life and struggle. On the basis of these stories we defend the view that in the period of their so-called political invisibility, Greek migrants were, in fact, subjecting the meaning of their political participation in the Australian social context to defining processes that would prove significant for their later more widely recognised involvement in Australian political life. Our findings thus pose a strong challenge to the dominant view of the researchers mentioned above.

In the early 1950s Greek migrants arriving in Melbourne and Sydney as part of Australia’s mass migration program were received in established, complexly structured politically organised communities (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2002). These communities included the Greek Democritus Workers’ League and the Greek Atlas League that were formed respectively in Melbourne in 1935 and in Sydney in 1939 (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004a:140–41). From 1950 the mass migration program produced an influx of migrants with a democratic and Left political orientation, initially from Cyprus, and then from Greece where many had direct experience of political persecution as a result of the civil war (Scarfe and Scarfe, 1994). These migrants were quickly drawn into the ranks of the Greek workers’ leagues whose political work intensified at the same time as they developed an extensive welfare program for newly arriving migrants. This program included assistance with housing and job seeking, familiarisation with the workings of public services, provision of interpreters, assistance to the unemployed and so on. The Democritus and Atlas workers’ leagues also served as an example to the Greek migrant worker communities in other Australian cities and industrial centres. For example, in Adelaide the influx of the new migrants gave rise to the formation of the Platon workers’ league in 1957 whereas in the 1960s Newcastle, Woollongong and Brisbane respectively saw the establishment of the Hellenic Socrates Club, the Herakleitus and the Palamas workers’ leagues (Tsounis, 1971).

The official settlement policy of the time anticipated the assimilation of migrants to the dominant culture. Moreover, naturalisation was taken as proof of assimilation given that the granting of Australian citizenship required an oath of allegiance to the British Crown (Jordens, 1997; Davidson, 1997). Greek-Australian activists challenged the official policy by actively disassociating the idea of Australian citizenship status from its affiliations with Britain. This separation was
a pre-condition for the emergence in Australian public life of the concept of multi-
cultural citizenship, a concept that is very familiar to us today not least because of
its supposed enabling of members of ethnic minorities to participate in Australian
political life as formally equal citizens. Elsewhere, we have argued that the idea of
challenging the conflation of the identities of Australian citizen and British subject
had already taken shape within the Greek-Australian communities from the 1940s
(Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2002). Here we want to focus on events that
constitute part of the Greek-Australian activists’ long-term struggle to translate
into political practice their demand for the separation of Australian citizenship
from loyalty to Britain. One example of this struggle concerned their demand that
their citizenship rights be respected through a process of initiating various forms
of inter-ethnic group co-operation in the early 1950s and 1960s.

Building inter-ethnic cooperation 1952–1953

The Greek Atlas League took the initiative in Sydney to call together a preliminary
meeting of migrant activists in order to promote the idea that there was a need
for collective organisation amongst the ethnic or “national groups” as they were
referred to at the time. A successful gathering of representatives from seven organi-
sations was held on 3 October 1952 and a meeting of ethnic minorities went ahead
as planned on 23 November (The Greek-Australian Review, November 1952).

According to a report by Manos Miltiades, the then Secretary of the Atlas league,
the November meeting resolved to co-ordinate campaigns around the following
issues:

1. “work for all”: to be achieved with the introduction by Government of public
   works;

2. “migration”: to cease immediately, in accordance with the demands of the
   ACTU in the light of current levels of migrant unemployment; the Govern-
   ment to cover the cost of passage to any unemployed migrants wishing to
   return home, in accordance with Australian Labour Party (ALP) policy;

3. “better relations with the Australian people”: mindful of efforts to use mi-
   grants as tools in the campaign to attack Australian working conditions, the
   meeting called upon all migrants to join their trade unions and take part in
   the Australian workers’ struggles for work and the peaceful development of
   the nation (The Greek-Australian Review, January 1953).

Miltiades noted further, “the decisions of the meeting were taken unanimously
and are crucial for migrants’ broad organised life struggle to gain their rights” (The
Greek-Australian Review, January 1953). The Sydney conference had succeeded in
placing migrants’ rights on the political agenda of the newly emerged inter-ethnic
group alliance.

Nicolacopoulos, Toula and Vassilacopoulos, George. 2007. Struggles to Belong: Greek Migrants' Citizenship Rights. In E. Close,
M. Tsiiankas and G. Couvalis (eds.) "Greek Research in Australia: Proceedings of the Sixth Biennial International Conference of Greek

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In Melbourne, however, with the formation in 1953 of the Federated Association for the Rights of Migrants the co-operation between ethnic groups seems to have gone even further than the building of a loose alliance. This association gave expression to the activists’ desire to establish the organisational arrangements that might foster on-going collective action. Still the lead-up to this event followed a similar path to the one that had been adopted in Sydney. Early in 1953 the Democritus league sent out an invitation to all migrant organisations in the state to join in preparations towards the organisation of a conference:

Our organisation feels that due to present conditions, migrants have found it difficult to settle in a new country. Because of growing unemployment, the housing situation and the need for migrants to defend their democratic rights, we feel that a general conference of all interested national groups is very important.

In this way every minority group would be able to bring its own problems up for discussion, and collectively we may be able to bring about a solution (Democritus, 23 February 1953).

The emphasis was squarely placed on migrants’ participation in the definition of minority group problems and on the potential power of collective organisation. By March 1953 there was already in operation a Provisional Committee for Migrant Rights consisting of representatives from five migrant groups (PCMR, 23 March 1953).

The Conference on Rights of Migrants that was held in Melbourne on 27 and 28 April 1953 addressed the same issues as those that had been raised at the Sydney gathering. How to assist and mobilise unemployed migrants was the first item on the agenda. In addition, participants discussed housing conditions and, significantly, they placed the issues within the framework of “the question of the rights of migrants as citizens of this country” (CRMP, 27 and 28 April 1953). On the second day of the proceedings, the Conference participants charged the Provisional Committee with the responsibility of drafting and circulating a constitution for a new federated organisation.

Having fulfilled its obligations, the Provisional Committee held a second conference in early September of 1953. There the participants adopted a constitution that created the Federated Association for the Rights of Migrants, a body that allowed for membership of both private individuals and organisations committed to the advancement of its objectives. According to Section II of the new Constitution, members were “to work to uphold and maintain the welfare of all European and other migrants” and, in particular: “to address the issues of employment, housing and the impact of the Immigration Act and its Dictation Test provisions”; to promote “friendly relations between Migrants and the Australian people”; to support the establishment of “National Groups Educational centres”; to promote the “reduction of existing periods of domicile to six months to obtain full Australian citizenship”; and to promote the cultures of national groups to the Australian people (FARM; Jewish Progressive Centre, 14 September 1953).
On one level, these early initiatives of political activism came as a direct response to the economic and political situation facing migrants, in particular the problems of unemployment, housing and attacks on democratic rights (Gibson, 1966:180). But they were not merely “problem focused” reactions to unfair treatment or discrimination. More importantly for our argument, they constituted attempts to bring into being a certain form of collective organisation amongst migrant minority groups. The form of organisation in question presupposed a self-definition that took the participants well beyond the Australian government’s assimilationist policies given that they linked formal citizenship status to a range of substantive rights (Stevenson, 2001; Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004b).

The National Groups Conference 1962

By the early 1960s the very same sorts of struggles were continuing but with much greater success on the all-important level of constituting the numerically increasing ethnic communities as a self-determining collective force within the Australian labour movement. When a group of five ethnic organisations went ahead to hold the National Groups Conference at the Victorian Trades Hall on 27 November 1962 they managed to bring two hundred participants to the event. Moreover, they drew upon the support of nine members of Parliament and sixteen trade unions sent their representatives (NGCP, 27 November 1962). Although a number of trade unions sponsored the conference, the initiating organisations were the Greek Democritus Workers’ League, the Jewish Progressive Centre, the Macedonian Progressive Centre, the Iberian Workers’ Centre and the Maltese Labour Movement. The first three groups had been working together from the early 1950s, beginning with the 1953 Conference.

The 1962 conference focused on the issue of discrimination and intimidation of migrant activists by security services and the Menzies government’s refusal to grant citizenship to migrant activists. This was happening at a time when the then Minister for Immigration, Alexander Downer, was denying that applications for naturalisation were being refused to migrants solely on the ground of political or trade union activism (The Sun, 15 November 1962:25).

The conference discussion wove together personal narratives, political analysis and calls for action. Characteristically, Herman Gonzales from the Iberian Workers’ Centre recounted his experience of intimidation at his workplace, the Southern Cross Hotel. There he had been threatened with the sack if he continued to “associate with Communists”. Despite the fact that his case had been taken up both locally, by the Brunswick City Council, and nationally, by the ALP, he was repeatedly refused citizenship without being informed as to the grounds.

1 See our other paper “The Greek-Australian unemployed movement and the construction of the migrants’ rights discourse” also in this collection.
Similar accounts came from many other participants whose personal histories were very diverse but for the fact of their commitment to organised labour and political activism. In the words of one participant,

I have lived in this country about 40 years. I am an ex-Serviceman and my application has been refused. I am proud to be a strong supporter of the Trade Union movement (NGCP, 27 November 1962).

This story was similar to that of Mr Karajas, the conference Chairman and Council member of the Miscellaneous Workers Union. Karajas’ citizenship had been refused despite his having lived and worked in the country for twenty-five years and having served in the Australian Armed Forces for three years during the war. The Greek wife of another participant was refused citizenship even though her husband, a British subject, had been living and working in Australia for twelve years. He was a supporter of the ALP and a vocal peace activist (NGCP, 27 November 1962).

One recurrent theme in the contributions to the Conference was the likening of the discrimination and intimidation to which migrant activists were being exposed to the conditions that conference participants had experienced with the rise of Nazism and Fascism in Europe. Mr Sarbinoff from the Macedonian Centre commented:

We [Macedonians] happen to have two Churches and the first thing Security Police ask is which Church do you belong to — the left wing church or right wing church. They also ask which club — right or left wing — do you belong to?

[...] I can recall the time when Hitler started on about the Communists and then he started on the Jews (NGCP, 27 November 1962).

Similarly, Mr Abuise of the Italo-Australian League recounted,

we have an Italian man here refused naturalisation only because he takes part in the Trade Union movement. They call at his place at 4 o’clock at night trying to break him down.

I recall when the Germans put their finger on Communists and Jews and they were condemned to death. Today, some of the actions of the Menzies Government are the same as the Fascists in Germany (NGCP, 27 November 1962).

Drawing upon the experiences of the Jewish community, Mr Fridmann, a spokesperson for the Jewish Progressive Movement, noted that there were,

many cases where fascists and others come to this country and gain naturalisation and some of these have taken part in fascist campaigns (NGCP, 27 November 1962).

Another conference theme that is especially noteworthy for our purposes was the relative ease with which migrant activists characterised the issues under discussion, not merely as problems that the migrants faced but, more importantly, as matters of grave concern to all as Australians who valued democracy. Characteristically, Fridmann appealed:

What I want to say here is not a matter for just we migrants, it is a matter for all Australians.

[...

The ALP and Trade Unions should see the knowledge of this discrimination spreads to every democratic section of this country (NGCP, 27 November 1962).

But Paul de Angelo from the Italian Club was quick to clarify things to the sympathetic audience of conference participants:

The Trade Unions will help but we should take this matter into our own hands, so as to bring this matter to the attention of the Australian people so that people have to pay attention (NGCP, 27 November 1962).

Here we have a clear indication of the unwillingness of these migrant community members to set themselves up as the potential recipients of the generosity of their Anglophone Australian supporters. In this position they would have been reduced to the mere objects of the political agency of people sympathetic to them. Had they called upon the trade unions to take the lead in their campaign, they would have been relying on institutions that were not of their making. This was not a position that these “new Australians” were willing to take up.

On the contrary, the record of the conference proceedings contains addresses by participants that indicate clearly and strongly the emergence of a certain form of collective self-positioning. Taking up the standpoint of self-defining subjects these migrant activists lay claim to much more than the name “Australian”. After all, migrants were being given the opportunity to become naturalised on the condition that they conform to their social positioning as “the perpetual-foreigners-within”. That is, until the 1970s the white Australian state offered the southern European migrants the chance to act as “compliant foreigners” by conforming to the expectations of the dominant group or risk being treated as “subversive foreigners” (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004a; 2004c; 2004d). The conference participants chose a third path instead. They insisted on the right to determine for themselves what it might mean for them to be Australian. The first to convey these sentiments at the conference was George Philopoulos, the representative of the Greek Democritus Workers’ League:

They will not grant citizenship to New Australians because the Government knows they will not get his vote.

They send their people to various places, to various people, to ask questions and also state they refuse citizenship because of their political beliefs — no other reason — not for criminal record.

They approach Greek migrants and tell them they publish certain publications around Melbourne and say that the migrants should keep quiet here, should not involve themselves, should not take part in the Australian way of life because we come from countries with a lower standard of living and in this country, with the better standard of living, we should “keep our mouths shut”.


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We appreciate this very much but when we come here we want to take part in the social life of the Australian people.

We don’t get things “handed to us on a platter” with mayonnaise etc., we have had to work here for the better way of life of the Australian people.

[...] Migrants have to take the best of the Australian people and make examples of the Australian people.

[...]

Finally friends, I can assure you of one thing that these migrants that I am speaking for, they are not Australians by accidents, they are Australians by choice and they will try to become Australians by choice, as I said before, but not by accident (NGCP, 27 November 1962).

Another participant from the Jewish community expressed similar sentiments:

[...] Australia puts a great deal by Migrants and they want these people to stay at a Migrant level.

[...] We are having children here, we have lived here for years. We are allowed to work and we want to decide the destiny of this country towards whose future we are building (NGCP, 27 November 1962).

So, active participation in political decision-making processes was evidently a crucial element of the conference participants’ understanding of what it meant to become Australian citizens. Moreover, having read into their own case of discrimination an attack on the Australian democratic traditions, Australian democracy had become something to whose meaning they were also keen contributors.

Given that they were not prepared to pay for formal citizenship status with their self-silencing, the conference participants had forcefully rejected the terms of migrants’ participation in public political life that were on offer at the time. How then was it possible for these activists to formulate and act out in public life an Australian identity that did not bow to the expectation that they might willingly conform to the dominant terms of public political life and succumb to their perpetual foreigner position? A number of circumstances would certainly have contributed to the development of their standpoint, including the links with the Australian labour movement that the Greek migrants had been a part of establishing from the 1920s following the formation of the Communist Party of Australia (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004a; 2002). But the condition we have highlighted here is the conceptual one. In our view, it was the social position combined with the cumulative experience of the migrant activists that had enabled them effectively to differentiate between the dominant ethnicity and the right of citizenship in their political practice. They had at once to contend with a strong commitment to becoming, as distinct from being made into, Australians within a personal context of valuing their cultural heritage, and a social context of explicit or implicit public association of Australian citizenship rights with a dominant ethnicity to which they were not themselves bound. In addition, as participants in the popular democratic movement of Greece, they were bearers of political traditions that aspired to the
familiar universalist ideals of western modernity. This enabled them to adopt as their own the rapidly expanding post-war human rights discourse and adapt it to the demands of the moment (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004a:159–98; 227–56). As such, in their own thinking and political practice the migrant minority activists were well positioned to detach the ideal of Australian citizenship from its historical conflation with British national origins. This orientation made possible the extensive promotion in the years to come of an alternative ideal of Australian citizenship, an ideal whose emergence in political life presupposed that the Greek migrants had indeed rejected their positioning as the perpetual foreigners within the dominant white Australian society.

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