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Cypriot Worker—a forgotten episode in the history of the SWP (Demetrios Hadjidemetriou) (Interview)

Historical Note

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Content

Interview: Cypriot Worker—a forgotten episode in the history of the SWP

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Demetrios Hadjidemetriou

*During the 1970s and 1980s, members of the International Socialists (IS), later the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), produced a number of publications with the purpose of politically organising different communities in Britain.[1] These publications were either printed in the English language or in a language relevant to the intended readership. While they have not benefited from much research, most publications have had some record of their existence.[2] This record has sometimes been “in passing” treatment in general histories. For example, *Flame*, the black workers’ paper, is discussed in Tony Cliff’s autobiography *A World to Win: Life of a Revolutionary*. A recent interview with Balwinder Rana in *International Socialism* gives context to the Asian paper *Chingari*, which was published in Urdu and Punjabi.[3] Both *Chingari* and *Flame* have also benefited from national pamphlets published jointly with the IS and SWP.[4]*

*One publication from that period that seems to have been forgotten is [Cypriot Worker](#)—a publication that was produced in Greek and Turkish. The *Cypriot Worker* star may only have shone brightly for a few years in the late 1970s, but it is significant that, today, nearly 50 years later, a host of those involved remain committed to their revolutionary socialist goals. John Rudge spoke to Demetrios Hadjidemetriou about his time at the *Cypriot Worker*.*

John: Can you tell me a bit about your own personal background, the Cypriot community in London and the political context of the 1970s?

Demetrios: I came to Britain as a student at the age of 16. That was in 1971. I rented a flat with my older brother in Finsbury Park, North London. I considered myself non-political and thought political activists were idiots. The news about the coup in Cyprus on 15 July 1974 reached me in Karpathos, a small Greek island, where I was on holiday. It affected the lives of every Cypriot, and I was no exception.[5]

I made my way back to London as soon as I could and followed the news closely. By the time I arrived, I made two conclusions that I have stood by ever since. One can ignore politics, but politics doesn't ignore anyone. I also concluded that the Cypriot Communist Party, the Anorthotiko Komma Ergazomenou Laou (AKEL; Progressive Party of Working People), was not the answer. My father and my oldest brother were both lifelong members of AKEL, which at that time received over 33 percent of the vote. However, as far as I was concerned, they failed to oppose the coup in any serious manner. That was simply not good enough. Specifically, soon after the coup and invasion, I remember reading a statement by Andreas Ziartides, an AKEL MP and general secretary of the AKEL-led trade union federation. Referring to those behind the coup, he said, "These are the people who destroyed Enosis." Enosis is the possible unification of Cyprus with Greece. Back then, AKEL supported Enosis, the motivation for the coup, and it was not until 1978 that they decided to drop this policy. As a young non-political person, I knew enough to realise how reactionary Ziartides sounded. He was someone claiming to be a communist and attacked the extreme right-wing paramilitaries who engineered a coup and set up a dictatorship—not from the left but from the right.

When I finally made contact with my family in Cyprus, I found out that my oldest brother Stelios, who was 22 at the time, was missing in action.

I studied chemistry at North London Polytechnic (the London Metropolitan University today) and became good friends with Phaedros Kavallaris, a fellow student, musician and active member of the Cypriot Worker group. Through Phaedros, I became active in the group. We were involved in Cypriot student politics, demonstrations and the community. In 1976, I joined the IS group, which later became the SWP.

In the 1970s, the Cypriot community in London probably numbered around 100,000, centred largely in a small number of North London boroughs. Many worked in the clothing industry. It was a relatively "young" community that experienced a strong influx from Cyprus at the time of independence from Britain in 1960 and then again with the coup in 1974. The year of 1974 was, of course, a defining one in the recent political history of the country: the extreme right-wing, Greek nationalist coup was followed by the Turkish invasion, eventually leading to the partition of Cyprus.

In terms of left politics, it's worth reiterating a point made by [Workers' Democracy](#), an organisation formed by former members of IS in Cyprus. It concerns AKEL:

"AKEL is a major force in Greek Cypriot politics. It prides itself as the largest non-ruling Communist Party in the world and regularly gets about 30 percent of the popular vote. Non-ruling though it may be, it has successfully assumed the role of kingmaker in Greek Cypriot politics for over a decade. It is also a party which enjoys the support of the working class and has a very substantial influence over the class.[6]"

In September 1972, AKEL officially established a British branch, but its roots in the Cypriot community date back to the 1930s and particularly the late 1950s.

John: How did Cypriot Worker start?

Demetrios: To be honest, it's not entirely clear. As I just said, 1974 was an eye-opener for many of us. Back then, the Cypriot Worker group already existed and people like Phedias Soteriades, Elsa Pylarinou, Phaedon Vassiliades and Jenny Fryda were politically active. Yet, they wanted more serious involvement with British politics. They would talk to people, discuss and debate. Phaedon told me a story that, at university, he was working with someone from the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP). They sold their newspaper *Newsline* together. When he got involved in the Right to Work Campaign,

this other guy got very angry and told Phaedon off.[7] It was a lesson for Phaedon regarding sectarianism, and it kept him away from the WRP. As things moved on, he got closer to IS, went to Skegness and either joined then or soon after.[8]

I believe Sophocles Rousos joined IS before 1974. But he left for Cyprus before I joined. Phaedon also soon moved back to Cyprus. Sophocles and some comrades had started publishing the monthly Marxist Discussion Bulletin there. The next stage followed with other comrades from Athens and Britain joining in and the setting up of the Workers' Democracy organisation. I contacted Phaedon recently, and he sent me this recollection:

"I remember little about the Cypriot Worker group as I left for Cyprus in June 1976... We had the idea to organise the Cypriot workers in a trade union. As things developed, of course, IS tried to convince us that this was wrong politically and that our task was to organise the Cypriot workers in British unions. Tony Cliff addressed our "group" and he tried to stress the importance of engaging with the politics of the UK, whether working or studying in the country. Otherwise, you may acquire the feature of émigrés: "the hands on your suitcases ready to go back home but after some years you end up 'middle-aged, middle-class bums.'" Along the way, our mistake was corrected. Our position on Cyprus at the time was "No Partition, No Federation!".[9]"

John: To what degree was the Cypriot Worker more than just a newspaper? And who was involved?

Demetrios: Cypriot Worker was a political group. I joined as a student. After 1974, a new student federation was formed in Britain, which was dominated by AKEL. I joined a faction that was to the left of AKEL. We met as Cypriot Worker with the non-student members and produced a monthly paper with the same name. So, we were organised as a revolutionary political group and met weekly at a comrade's flat to discuss current issues, mainly what was going on in Cyprus.

I can't remember everyone's full names, it's been so long. Apart from those I have already mentioned, Bambos Stylianou, another Bambos, Phedros Kavalaris, Sotos, Demetris Demetriou, Theodoulitsa Kouloubri, Kika, Meletis and Antroulla Economou were part of the organisation. Later, Ayshe Asim, Yiota Kontopoullou, Daphnos Economou and Xenophon Hasabis also joined. All in all, we had about 30 people.

It's worth recalling that our group was made up largely of Greek Cypriots, although some Turkish-Cypriot comrades also played very important roles. In February 1979, a letter titled "[How can Cyprus be Free?](#)", signed by Ali Saffet on behalf of the Cypriot Worker group, was published in the paper of the International Socialist Organization in the United States, *Socialist Worker*. Ali Saffet is Roni Margulies, a leading figure in our Turkish sister organisation.[10] He didn't want to use his real name in public, so we gave him that name. He joined IS independently and worked with us very closely for a while, especially once we started publishing in both Greek and Turkish. It's difficult to describe him as just a member of our group—he did a lot more, especially working among the Turkish Community in London, mainly in Hackney. After the first years of Cypriot Worker, in which meetings took place in Greek, we changed to English.

John: How close were you to the IS group and the SWP?

Demetrios: We were in touch with IS, which in those days was building the Right to Work Campaign. Over time, more members of Cypriot Worker joined IS, and an experienced IS member, who spoke Greek well, came to work with us. A little later, Phil Marfleet, who was the local IS and SWP organiser, became involved. Before a Cypriot Worker meeting, members of IS would meet separately in advance to discuss the issues of the day, then turned up as a group. This really annoyed the others. Both were

moving apart politically, and a split soon took place. We were in a minority and were, in a sense, expelled. However, I argued that our group should continue to publish the *Cypriot Worker*, and the others didn't seem to mind, as they had no interest in maintaining it.

At first, they continued to meet, but I think at some point they got tired of each other and went their separate ways. We, on the other hand, continued to meet, published the *Cypriot Worker*, sold it and were active in the community. When Phil took over, we set up the Cypriot Defence Campaign through his and Pambo's Stylianous initiative. By then, we considered ourselves a group within IS working in the Cypriot community but also being active in local IS branches.

Fairly early on, IS organised a day school for those of us in *Cypriot Worker*. It was held above the IS bookshop in Finsbury Park, where the first and second floors were used as offices and meeting spaces. Nigel Harris spoke and, whilst I don't remember his subject, Nigel was always a brilliant speaker. It was a joy to listen to him. Cliff spoke on Cuba, and I think there was a third talk.

I still remember that Cliff argued that Cuba, despite its efforts to diversify the economy, was more than ever dependent on sugar production. The topics made not much sense to me. I expected discussions about Lenin and imperialism or Marxist economics. However, from today's perspective, it made perfect sense! The leadership of IS knew we were close to them, as we were involved in the Right to Work Campaign. But they were not sure how influenced we were by Maoist politics and the tactics of the Cuban Revolution, Che Guevara's guerilla war as a way of achieving socialism. Alex Callinicos was not present that day, but around this time I remember him emphasising that Rhodesia was probably the last place where guerilla warfare was still possible.

Later, within the SWP, we were either known as the Greece/Cyprus Fraction or as the SWP Cypriot Worker Group. We contributed to the SWP Internal Bulletin of May 1977 with a piece titled: "Those who can—those who can't do international work". It outlined how and why we recruited to the SWP:

"If we take the job of recruiting foreigners seriously, we have tremendous opportunities for spreading our politics, particularly in the third world and semi-third world countries. In a year and a half we have recruited six Greeks and nine Cypriots. This has been done not on the basis of discussion groups about the politics of Greece and Cyprus, but on the basis of activities like the Right to Work Campaign, the Cypriot Defence Campaign, and on emphasising the importance of work here and now. These activities have led us into activity and discussion about Cypriot politics—but with a real edge from our practical experience. When we go back to our countries we will be going back with a valuable political training and experience."

Our contribution stemmed from the belief that the SWP's international work would achieve more measurable and lasting results if it focused on practical work with foreign students and workers in this country, as opposed to the (impossible-to-measure) interactions between the "international bureaux" of various political organisations.

Certainly, comrades recruited and developed by IS and the SWP went on to help form revolutionary organisations aligned with the Party's politics in not only Cyprus but also elsewhere: the Socialist Workers Group in Germany, the Socialist Workers Movement in Ireland, the International Socialist Organisation in Ghana, and the Revolutionary Socialist Workers Party and marx-21 in Turkey. In today's situation, where it's hard to find revolutionary organisations of any size or influence overseas—and the SWP's politics are even harder to find—perhaps the discussion is still relevant.

John: So, you were known as the Greece/Cyprus Fraction. What was your relationship with the Greek comrades like?

Demetrios: Greece has a proud revolutionary tradition but, of course, the military coup in April 1967 led to the so-called Regime of the Colonels, which imprisoned activists or forced them into exile. One organisation, the Organosi Socialitiki Epanatasi (OSE; Socialist Revolution Organisation), was active in London. Its leading figures were Maria Styllou and Panos Garganas. Both had a friendly relation with IS. Maria was involved in the struggles at the London School of Economics and Political Science and in close contact with Chris Harman. Maria and Panos returned to Greece in 1974, with the fall of the Colonels, but some London-based members of the OSE stayed in Britain to work with the Cypriot Worker group as well as IS and the SWP.

In the Cypriot Worker group, Jenny Fryda and Elsa Pylarinou were important figures from mainland Greece. Alberto Florentin is another Greek comrade who lived in London but left for Greece before I joined. In the late 1970s or early 1980s, he moved to Cyprus and worked with Workers Democracy, our organisation there. For years, he played a leading role and, together with Dinos Agiomamitis, wrote our important book on Cyprus: [The Cyprus Problem and the Internationalist Tasks of Greek Cypriot Revolutionaries](#).^[11]

Initially, the OSE never decisively aligned with IS and the SWP since they were influenced by Italian Mao-centrism, notably the Avanguardia Operaia (Workers Vanguard). They moved closer to the SWP in the mid-1980s, and it took about five years of debate, political collaboration, and personal friendship (notably with Chris Harman, Julie Waterson and Alex Callinicos) to join the International Socialist Tendency, our international group. In 1997, they changed their name to the Sosialistiko Ergatiko Komma (SEK; Socialist Workers Party).

I remember a personal conversation with Costas Pittas, a leading member of the OSE. It was in Athens, at one of their Marxism festivals. Their paper came out once every two weeks or monthly, and they were reluctant to produce it on a more regular basis. He told me that comrades from the SWP, particularly Chris Harman and Alex Callinicos, pushed them and emphasised the importance of having a weekly paper. This was around the time when they were considering changing their name from OSE to SEK. It was a significant move, and Costas told me the story as an example of how the British comrades pushed them in the right direction. The K in SEK stands for “komma”, which is party in Greek. So, it was not just a simple change of name, but it signified a change from a group to a party, similar to the change from IS to SWP. This step was important for the Greek comrades. Having a weekly paper was a contributing factor. Of course, the weekly paper played a huge role in the growth of the SEK; comrades had to become more organised and their presence in the movement and ability to intervene enhanced.

Over the years, the comrades in the Britain, Greece and Cyprus met regularly at the Marxism festival in London and later in Athens, where they discussed issues and exchanged ideas. Just like the cooperation between Cypriot and Greek revolutionaries in London, the cooperation between the two in both Cyprus and Greece was key to the development of Workers Democracy. At the same time, the comrades in Cyprus were able to help the Greek comrades to clarify and enhance their position on the Cyprus issue.

John: What was the political programme of the Cypriot Worker group? Were there any key statements around which you organised?

Demetrios: We copied “Where We Stand” from *Socialist Worker*. As we were members of IS and the SWP, politically, we developed at branch meetings, Skegness and Marxism festivals. As for the Cyprus question, we initially argued for a solution from below as opposed to relying on influencing governments. We wanted a return to the pre-partition period, where the two communities, Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, lived side by side. We later argued for the right of Turkish Cypriots to

self-determination. At some point, we stopped emphasising the big imperialist powers, the US and Britain, the former colonial power, and started to investigate the role played by the local ruling class and nationalist organisations. The latter included the Ethniki Organosis Kypriou Agoniston (EOKA; National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters) and the Türk Mukavemet Teşkilatı (TMT; Turkish Resistance Organisation).

John: You mentioned it in passing, but I have been told that the comrades in Workers Democracy developed a distinctive analysis of the national question in Cyprus that sharply differentiated them from the Greek-Cypriot left. Could you say a bit more on this, and also to what extent that analysis was shared by Cypriot Worker?

[Needs Turkish Translation](#), [Needs Greek Translation](#), [Other Material](#), [Decade 2000-2029](#), [2024](#), [Undefined](#), [Undefined Location](#), [History of the Milieu](#)

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