Anti-militarism and the hypocrisy of the Greek Cypriot Left

by meidei

On the 5th of December, Neoklis Silikiotis, an MEP for the Progressive Party of Working People (AKEL), raised the issue of Haluk's imprisonment before the European Commission, denouncing this gross violation of human rights. The Greens released a statement praising Haluk's commitment to peace. Earlier this year, when Murat Kanatlı was also imprisoned for refusing to participate in reservist exercises of the Turkish Cypriot Security Forces, the Movement for Social Democracy (EDEK) joined AKEL in raising awareness about the issue within European institutions.

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Greek Cypriot media outlets gave unusual, sympathetic exposure to those news too. But both the self-styled left-wing political parties here in the south, and the media missed, or rather, purposefully ignored a very important fact. A fact that if acknowledged, would forbid them from capitalising on Haluk's, and every Haluk's moral triumph. Moreover, it would force them to admit their moral defeat.

While it is true that Haluk and Murat are vocal proponents of reunification and have condemned the ongoing occupation of northern Cyprus by the Turkish military, their refusal to serve in the Turkish Cypriot Security Forces goes above and beyond that. They refuse to serve this vile and rotten institution in its entirety. In a short video put together by Haluk's friends, he describes militarism as a web entrapping our society, as inherently sexist, degrading to human dignity, to personal autonomy. Haluk is not just against the Turkish army, he is an anti-militarist. Like commentators on social media clarified "if, in a reunified Cyprus, we commit the same mistake of having an army, we'd still refuse to serve".

What does the Greek Cypriot Left has to show 'at home'? AKEL, EDEK and the Greens enthusiastically join the Right at tightening the laws against 'draft dodging', threatening to restore all the provisions that had to be abolished for the EU acquis, and they participate the shaming of anyone who refuses to serve in the National Guard. And while this bi-annual circus performance that repeats itself before every conscription period doesn't always lead to dramatic changes in the law, it reinforces the militarisation of our society and the belief that every man who's not ready to take up arms and fight whomever the State commands him to is a lesser being; a sloth at best, although the Left doesn't always shy away from using the right-wing rhetoric of 'traitors'.

So what is really there to the GC Left's anti-militarist reflexes when it comes to Turkish Cypriot conscientious objectors, the lip-service they pay to peace and communal rapprochement (and AKEL's anti-NATO slogans), when they are unconcerned by National Guard and militarism as a whole, and instead actively participate in maintaining the stigma against Cypriots in the south who refuse to take up arms? Or, for that matter, when they are tying our island's fate with the militarised regimes of the Eastern Mediterranean and their "1st" or "2nd" world allies, in the name of 'exclusive economic zones'? AKEL's time in government didn't lead to any reduction in 'defence' spending, keeping Cyprus in the Top 10 of the Global Militarisation Index for a decade now.

Is the National Guard, in the eyes of AKEL, EDEK and the Greens, that different from the TC Security Forces? Is there such thing as a “good” army, and is the National Guard it? We know from experience that this is not the case. The National Guard is a hotbed of sexism, homophobia, racism and xenophobia. From the (technically banned) slogans that conscripts are forced to chant during training, which glorify the rape of “Turkish mothers and sisters” as a battle tactic (and a tool to humiliate Turkish men, which so blatantly showcases the belief that a woman is a man’s property -wife, sister or daughter- and her sexuality is something that can bring shame to her ‘owner’), to very real cases of radicalisation and recruitment by officers who openly take part in the attacks perpetrated by neo-fasicst organisations such as the National Popular Front (ELAM), Golden Dawn’s affiliate in Cyprus. Moreover, is the forced and dangerous labour in the National Guard any more defensible? In this country we are too accustomed in celebrating heroes, that we call teenagers killed in military accidents during peacetime no less ‘heroic’, as if they were given the choice to be anywhere else, absolving their employer (ie the state) of any responsibility. On the same vain, we accept that men will sometimes use their reservist rifles to assert what they perceive as their ‘ownership’ over an ex-wife and/or children (a perception reinforced within the militarist structure, as already mentioned), with any attempt to even slightly reform this arrangement being quickly withdrawn in the name of ‘mobilisation readiness’. The militarisation of the Cypriot society runs deep and those examples are not exhaustive.

It’s true that the Republic of Cyprus, in the last few years, recognised the right to conscientious objection, just for 18-year-olds who are currently conscripted, an option not available to those in the north, but both armies equally deny the right to conscientious objection to those who belong in the reserve forces. The European Bureau for Conscientious Objection in its 2013 report says about Cyprus:

> In the southern part, the Special Rapporteur had the impression that the topic of conscientious objection to military service does not receive much public attention and that the few existing cases have not led to larger public discussion. Those who refuse military service for reasons of conscience are given the option of doing either unarmed military service (special service) or alternative civilian service. Unarmed military service is carried out in the National Guard and conscientious objectors neither carry weapons nor participate in any activities relating to weapons. Unarmed military service is between three and five months longer than the period of time the individual would have to serve in the military service. The alternative civilian service is carried out in the public sector within areas relating to the protection of the environment or in the social sector. Alternative military service is between seven and nine months longer than the period of time for military service. Since 2008, approximately 10 to 12 conscientious objectors each year have reportedly served at various public offices in the southern part.

Anti-miliatarists in the south are given the ‘option’ to serve a much longer service, after a long and complicated procedure of ‘evaluation’, for 8 hours per day and 5 days per week, for nearly 3 years, all while paid 66% of the monthly allowance for conscripts, which is calculated from a base allowance of 150~200EUR depending on socio-economic criteria. There’s no doubt that the intent behind this ‘alternative’ is to punish anti-militarist sentiments by forcing conscientious objectors to work for the State in degrading conditions, for an even longer term.

The last part also highlights the classist nature of the armies in Cyprus and around the world, and it’s the epitome of the parliamentary Left’s moral defeat in protecting the interests of the working class: they have consented to, and even actively participated in creating a system that forces the less privileged members of our capitalist society in the servitude of the state and its army. The more

privileged have all sorts of ways to game the conscription law (using connections or bribing the right people to get a medical diagnosis that would exempt them from conscription), they can even afford the punitive alternative service without degrading their living standards (making a hourly wage of 70 cents while working full-time as the alternative service provides cannot realistically be an option for the working class). Once again, it's the oppressed who are being forced to maintain the mechanism of their oppression. And this is true not just for Cyprus, but around the world. Conscription armies like Greece's and Turkey's give the option of "buying" service time, leaving the poor serving the militarist institution. The United States uses it's nevertheless 'professional' army is a welfare scheme. For many American poor, enlisting in the US Army has become the only path to affordable higher education, health care, or even to get food on the table.

The so-called Left quickly buried their promises to the working class: *Demilitarisation of Cyprus, disarmament in the entire world*. They have joined the liberals in calling for a "robust, professional army eventually, but conscription while we are in a State of Need". They have consented to this, but we do not (and we were never asked anyway).

We recognise no 'national duty' to any state, our only duty is peace.

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