

Social Movements as Agents of Change: A Social Analysis of the Popular Labour Movement in Cyprus

[Κοινωνικά Κινήματα ως Φορείς Αλλαγής: Μια Κοινωνική Ανάλυση του Λαϊκού Εργατικού Κινήματος στην Κύπρο]

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While there is a rich literature on several dimensions of the modern political history of Cyprus, this is not the case with its social and economic dimensions. Academic studies about Cyprus' labour movement are scarce and often tend to be quite specific, focusing on some dimensions and time periods. Neocleous' book offering an overview of the labour movement from the late 19th to the early 21st century is thus a welcome contribution to Cyprus studies. More importantly, the fact that it is written in Greek and with limited academic jargon, makes the book accessible to a much wider audience in Cyprus.

The book is structured chronologically, covering the transition from the Ottoman to the British rule, and subsequently the early and late colonial eras and the early and late independence eras. While the first chapters set the scene by describing the appalling socio-economic conditions that prevailed before the development of the labour movement, the ones that follow trace the rise and achievements of trade unionism, which transformed the socio-economic field by the end of the British colonial rule. The main argument the author develops is that the welfare state in general and the social insurance system in particular, did not come about through the initiative of the British Colonial Authorities or the Cypriot politicians of the late colonial period, but as a result of the constant and accumulating pressure exerted by a rising social movement based on the forces of labour which developed and grew stronger during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Through adopting a broad Marxian perspective, the author sees the establishment of social insurance as the outcome of sustained social conflict and the legislative reforms as reflecting a shift of the class balance of power already happening at the socio-economic realm.

Neocleous recognises the limitations of the initial social insurance scheme intro-

duced in 1956 and accounts for its weaknesses and excluded groups. At the same time, he acknowledges the significance of labour legislation and the revision of the public benefit law, a few years earlier, all of which contributed to the alleviation of poverty in Cyprus. In the following chapters covering the independence period, the author examines the operation of the social insurance system, focusing on its actual consequences on the elderly population and on the reforms undertaken to make it stronger, fairer, and more efficient. A lot of attention is given to the 1980 social insurance reform, which has effectively shaped the system as we know it today. The shift from the flat rate to the pro-rata model was both superior in terms of coverage and much more just. Yet the benefits of the new system were not available to all immediately, as those already at pension age at the time continued to be covered by the old system, creating the paradox that the cohort that had struggled most to have social insurance established, ultimately benefited less than the subsequent cohorts.

In the historical narrative developed by Neocleous, strong emphasis is placed on the political context and the intense ideological conflict that structured developments in the late colonial period. The mobilisation of the Cypriot working class faced the opposition, not only of employers, but also of the Church and the Colonial Authorities who were opposed both to the extension of labour and to welfare rights. Yet the opponents of the popular classes were only able to delay, not prevent, the introduction of the social insurance system.

One of the main strengths of the book is the use of archival material, as well as published sources that have been neglected or insufficiently analysed, including the experiences and the voice of activists. Although the author does link Cyprus' case with international experience and he does situate his analysis in theoretical frameworks, the theoretical and comparative dimensions remain less developed than the empirical analytic ones. The key contribution of the book is the detailed historical account, not only of the establishment of social insurance in the late colonial times, but also of its elaboration and development during independence. As a comprehensive account of the history of social welfare in Cyprus and an analysis of the role of the organised working class in bringing it about, the book constitutes a valuable resource for both the academic and the general audience.

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