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Turkey

Turkey's Defiant Working Class: From Offense to Defense

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“He is afraid that it will be like TEKEL, he is afraid that they will come and occupy the square and won't leave.”

Muharrem Güler, who was Governor of İstanbul at that time, explaining why Erdoğan was afraid of Gezi Park demonstrations with reference to the TEKEL Tobacco workers strike from 2010.

When it comes to opposition in Turkey most people would think about academics, human rights activists, journalists or political activists and rightly so. But actually, these are not what scares Erdoğan most or these are not what Erdoğan had historically compromised most. When the historic demonstrations started in Gezi Park, the Governor of İstanbul was saying that Erdoğan is afraid that this demonstration might turn into something like Tobacco workers occupation of Ankara from 2010. [1]

At that time thousands of Tobacco workers from all over the country occupied the most central neighborhood of Ankara for more than 2 months in order to protest against privatization of their factories and they were also protesting against their own union Confederation, Türk İİ, for not supporting them. That's why the occupation started in front of the Confederation building. It was probably the first time the Erdoğan Government felt threatened. They tried to threaten workers but it did not work. These workers, of which the vast majority are AKP voters, were protesting against the very party which they supported. Generally, cultural and political polarization of the country based on lifestyle values helped Erdoğan quite well. So a radical workers' action which might end this artificial polarization was seen as a big threat for the Government. That is why in the end, the Government was forced to reach to some sort of compromise with them. When thousands of young people occupied the main square of İstanbul in the Gezi Park demonstrations in a way influenced by Tahrir, Erdoğan's first reaction was to remember the TEKEL workers' demonstrations from 3 years ago.

But TEKEL is not the only example of these sort of huge spontaneous uprisings of the working class in Turkey. In May 2015, another wildcat strike which started at Bursa plant of Renault spread across the entire automobile industry of the country; FIAT, FORD and many supplier companies started work stoppages and factory occupations. These actions were not called by any union or any sort of organizations, and the workers of these companies who had never seen each other before and were hundreds of kilometers away from each other, somehow became part of a countrywide movement of strikes and factory – probably one of the rare examples of this in working-class world history. Also at that time, the Government did not want to create tension with these workers, up to the election, police did not attack this demonstrations. And after the election the government raised the minimum wage by about 30 percent in order to calm down the reactions. When they saw that they could isolate some of the factories then these demonstrations were also attacked by police force and mass dismissals of the leaders of the strikes. [2]

The most recent example of these sort of wildcat strikes was in the construction of the new airport of the country. More than 10 000 construction workers protested against their working conditions in a very militant way after a service bus accident. Workers' demands were very simple and basic, sleeping and eating in the proper conditions and working in proper conditions. But in the next morning, at 4 am in the morning police attacked the workers' barracks, 500 of them were detained, some of them were even charged with terrorism. The president of DISK, the construction workers' union, is still in prison. This demonstration was also not called by any union or organization. It was simply an explosion of anger of the workers. [3]

Union density is very low in the country, only 10 per cent union membership and 6 per cent for collective bargaining coverage. This is mainly because of extremely restrictive trade union legislation which was introduced by the military

junta of 1980. Turkey's union legislation requires more than 50 per cent membership condition for union representation at the workplace; membership is registered the Government website system among many other restrictions. And legal strikes are limited to very strict conditions in case of dispute during collective bargaining agreements. That is why these sort of "illegal" strikes are so common. When it comes to wildcat strikes around the world most people would probably think about China, but Turkey is probably in the second place after China.

The working class of Turkey is weakly organized in terms of unionization but very well organized in terms of self-organization. In the strikes at Renault, each basic work unit had its own spokespersons who then chose spokespersons for their departments and then spokespersons for their shifts. So in their struggle against the union, they sort of copied company's managerial schema and built their own organizing based on that.

Except TEKEL, these strikes/actions were for gaining new rights like pay increases. So in a way workers were on the offensive. In last ten years, Turkey's economy has grown quite fast. Since 2008, number of the workers who work in automobile production of the country has grown almost 4 times bigger. Turkey has become the biggest car exporter to EU. Turkey is the eighth biggest steel producer in the World. But workers have not benefited from these productivity gains, the minimum wage is still around 230 Euros per month and the minimum wage in Turkey is not an exception, according to statistics almost half of the entire workforce is working for the minimum wage. And even for the skilled workers who are working in auto assembly, the average hourly wage in companies like Renault, FIAT etc. is around 1.8 Euros per hour, and this is the average of these factories, not the minimum.

Wages and working conditions are not catching up with the growth of the wealth of bourgeoisie. We can tell that workers are seeing the growth in wealth, feeling the increase in the production from their work-pace, number of units they have to produce each day and asking for their share of the wealth. But probably we are coming towards the end of this era.

The growth of the Turkey's economy in the last ten years were mainly a result of facility in finding loans in this period. In the aftermath of 2008 crisis, many Central Banks around the world started to pump money in the world economy. Some central banks were even offering negative interest rates and Turkish companies were one of the biggest customers of these cheap credits. Private sectors debt has reached to 247 billion US\$ and 123 billion of this is the short term debt. And a very important portion of these debts has gone to mega construction projects. So the Turkish bourgeoisie is highly dependent on the foreign debt and now the era of cheap credits is over. Erdoğan's row with Trump, only helped the effects of this upcoming crisis to be felt earlier. Inflation rate has reached to 26 per cent. Many companies have started to declare bankruptcy or to ask for restructuring of their debts.

This trend will probably will get even worse. The government also sees that, and is trying to make adjustments to soften the effects of this upcoming crisis. Recently the government changed the law on "Short Term Work Benefit" which is a benefit found for times of crisis and disasters (earthquakes, floods etc.). It allows companies to employ workers for fewer hours and the remaining amount of the salary can be paid through unemployment benefit fund. Now with new amendments on this legislation, it will be easier for companies to apply to this fund.

Of course, now when the crisis is knocking on the door, bourgeois economists have already started to introduce their austerity measures which will destroy existing rights of workers. On many TV channels, you can see economists trying to convince public opinion that IMF and its "bitter pill" is the only way out of the upcoming crisis. Even though the AKP government is reluctant to knock the door of IMF, mainly because of their strong rhetoric against the Fund, they have already found a middle ground. They have introduced a new economic plan which literally copies the IMF Turkey report from April 2018. [4] And they are looking for private consultancy companies to report on the progress of this process and advise on further "cost cutting" measures. Of course cost here means, health, education, social rights basically the livelihoods of millions of people. In the report the IMF also proposed many direct attacks on workers' rights. Such as keeping the minimum wage low, creating a fund for severance pay and reducing the amount,

implementing further flexibility measures in working life, limiting the increase of public servants' wages etc. among others.

Of course now with the conditions of crisis and many attacks towards their rights probably the nature of workers' actions will change as well, rather than offensive actions which aim to gain new rights, we will probably see more defensive actions where workers are trying to protect their already-won rights, or worse, against closure of their workplace, for their unpaid wages etc.

Unfortunately most of these actions are lost from the outset and do not help to improve self-esteem of the workers, on the contrary crisis destroys workers' self-esteem and their ability to act. So most people would try to protect the jobs they already have without trying to advance their rights. This is particularly true in a political context like Turkey where the left is politically absent. There is no leftwing political alternative to crisis on the public discussion. Even during the massive mobilizations which we described in the first few paragraphs, the left was not able to link with these workers or play any role in the mobilization of these demonstrations. This is mainly result of structural weakness of the left in Turkey and its reluctance to build a political alternative. Today in the public discussion, if you ask anyone what are the proposals of the left, no one will be able to answer. So while socialists in Turkey has lost chance to build links with radicalized sections of working class during these wildcat strikes, it is now also losing another opportunity to mobilize society against possible attacks along with rhetoric about the crisis and to raise demands for advancement of rights (like more social spending, nationalization of bankrupted factories and not paying their foreign debt etc.) instead of cutting social rights.

In the absence of a leftwing political alternative to the crisis, attacks on workers' rights and austerity policies will get stronger. And in the end, the discontent created by these policies and the results of the crisis might lead to strengthening the extreme right political alternatives. Turkey's traditional fascist movement (Grey Wolves) had a split before the June 2018 elections and now both fractions of the fascists are in the Parliament. The two of them in total received 21 per cent of the votes which is historically the highest vote for the "grey wolf" movement. And one of them (MHP) is the de facto political partner of Erdoğan. Their voice will be heard much more strongly. This might result in directing this discontent into attacks towards Syrian refugees living in Turkey or the Kurdish population in workers' neighborhoods. In last few months we have already seen examples of these sorts of pogroms which were started over minor issues in various neighborhoods.

That's why it is even more important now to build a united left wing political alternative to the crisis, the left in Turkey is already late on that but hopefully not too late. The past sectarian tradition of the radical left in Turkey helped to create this political void. Ignoring the necessity to overcome these sectarian attitudes in order to build a broader leftwing political alternative in Turkey, might have much worse and more dramatic results.

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[1] For more information about TEKEL strike, "[Turkey: A Brief History of TEKEL Struggle](#)".

[2] You can find more information here, [Trouble in paradise: A cautionary tale for big capital in Turkey](#).

[3] For more information in French [-]"Turquie?: la colère des ouvriers du chantier de l'aéroport

">npa2009.org/actualite/international/turquie-la-colere-des-ouvriers-du-chantier-de-laeroport].

[4] See the report [here](#).