Turkey: A Brief History of TEKEL Struggle

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The public sector in Turkey is always seen as the best employment opportunity for people who are looking for a secure job. But with the neo-liberal policies which are going on for some time in Turkey, public sector is now mostly known by worker resistances against its precarious employment policies. The people who used to be most sure about their future, are now not certain if they will have a job next year. And that's why we start to hear more about the resistances from public sector, last year young university academicians revolted against a law article called 50D which will result with loss of their jobs and unsecure jobs just like the article 4c which TEKEL workers are resisting for a few months now. Even the numbers and letters change between 4C and 50D, the main logic is same, more precarious jobs for every sector of workers; it is same for Phd graduate academicians or tobacco factory workers.

4-C, Another Word for Precarity

TEKEL, the government monopoly (by the way the word “tekel” itself means “monopoly” in Turkish) of tobacco and alcohol is in the privatization program for many years. The company broke down into small parts and privatized partially for long time. Most recently, the tobacco part of the factory which consists of 43 factories in 21 cities, is sold to British American Tobacco in 2008, at that time there were some resistance too, workers shut them down to the factory. But that resistance was very small and didn’t get much support by the trade union. Actually, after the privatization, the BAT Company thanked to the Union for their cooperation with a press ad. After the privatization, the company closed all the factories except one and sacked the 12 000 TEKEL workers. With the beginning of this year government proposed TEKEL workers jobs in other public sector establishments with less than half of their current salary under Article 4-C of public officers law.

4-C is introduced by government in 2004 as a new legislation for workers who lost their jobs after privatization. According to this all of these workers could be employed in the temporary jobs in public sector which is called article 4-C in public officials law. Right now, there are 70 000 workers who are working under article 4-C with no job security and social rights. The TEKEL workers revolted against this legislation and they asked at least to be employed in other public sector organizations with their current salary and social rights. On December 15, a march to Ankara took place from every city which has TEKEL units. And on the 4th day of the resistance, police brutally attacked the workers which created a huge support for TEKEL workers and give more visibility to their situation.

The TEKEL neighborhood or “Sakarya Commune”

This attack can be considered as a turning point for TEKEL resistance. After that, workers went in front of their trade union confederation, Turk-Is’s headquarters. They have created shelters in the streets around the Union building. And turned that neighborhood into a “Commune”. Sakarya, the neighborhood which is known for its bars, cafes, restaurants and has a very central place in the daily life of Capital of the
Country, is now known as “TEKEL neighborhood”. Some even named it as “Sakarya Commune”. TEKEL workers and their families started to live around their Union Confederation building. And the Kurdish and Turkish workers who are coming from very different places of the country started to live and fight together in the same area against their common enemy, “precarity”. This is one of the important points of the TEKEL resistance.

Obviously the President of the Confederation who in the past never felt necessary to hide his support for governing party AKP, didn’t have this in his mind. The pressure from the below was too high that the trade union bureaucracy didn’t find any other solution than acting as they are supporting this struggle. This is another important point of the TEKEL resistance. This resistance is developed from the below, in one point workers made referendum between each other in order to decide if they will go on struggling or quit. But it wasn’t that easy. During one of the demonstrations, workers took control of the stage with the slogans of “General Strike” against trade union leadership. Many times they asked for resignation of the President of the Confederation during the small demonstration in front of the Turk-IS headquarters. So TEKEL workers wasn’t only fighting against the Government but they were also fighting against their own bureaucracy.

The General Strike which never happened

In the end the calls of general strike made by workers and left wing political groups was heard by the trade union leadership and a general strike call made by four Trade Union Confederations for 4th of February. And they learned that organizing a general strike needs more than just saying the word. The so called general strike was a disaster. Except a few very small examples nobody stopped work and daily life went on as nothing happened. Actually it was foreseeable that there won’t be a general strike on that day when you consider how organized the working class in Turkey. After this, a very big demonstration organized in which many people from all over the country went to Ankara and spent a night together with TEKEL workers in “TEKEL neighborhood”. This happened in a time when Prime Minister is threatening the workers by saying that police can attack the tents and remove them from the street. Actually these sort of declarations made several times by various public officials. Sometimes it gets as ridiculous as this; once a public official told that “the TEKEL workers are polluting the environment that’s why they need to remove them from the area.”

Government also made another statement saying that all the sacked workers must accept their new jobs in other public sector establishment with 4-C status before the end of February otherwise they won’t be able to apply for 4-C status after that time. They tried to force workers to choose between a work with half of their salary (with no social rights) and unemployment in a country where there are millions of unemployed people. Of course some workers, choose to go back to their home countries to sign the contract because they were afraid of being unemployed and none of them has the luxury to be unemployed for a long time. But this number was always very limited.

In the end of the month, High Court’s decision came to help of the trade unionists. The high court’s decision which extends the time frame to apply for 4-C status is used as an excuse to finish the resistance in Ankara and they turned back to their home towns. This court decision is sold as a victory by trade union bureaucracy. And actually workers also needed something like that because everybody was too tired after more than two months and they needed to turn back to their daily life. After this decision which doesn’t change the situation of the workers but only gives them some more time, a declaration made by the trade unions, said that they are leaving now but they will come back to Ankara in April and they will organize a general strike on 26th of May with a set of demands.

The Battle of 1st April

And when the 1st of April arrived many people with TEKEL workers traveled to Ankara for a demonstration in front of the Turk-Is again. But Ankara police this time never let anybody to enter there, actually they
even stopped busses in the entrance of Ankara. During the day there were clashes with the workers and their supporters against the police. Police turned Ankara into a battleground. They have invaded the once “Sakarya Commune” or “TEKEL neighborhood” and they were determined to defend it with their life.

Right now, it seems that TEKEL resistance is finished but it gave very important experiences and lessons which some of them are explained above. Most importantly it gave a new excitement to radical left of the country which feels almost dead for many many years. Many of the left wing groups went to Ankara in order to support TEKEL workers and many of them were expecting too many things from them. Of course, it will be unfair to expect TEKEL workers to change the whole destiny of the left which stays silent for so long time. But at least they have created a very important example and now there are other factories who are in privatization stage and their workers will be offered with 4-C status too. For example, sugar factory workers. We will see if the lessons learned from TEKEL can help the sugar factory workers.

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