

Beating multinationals in Turkey: TÜMTİS labour union success through solidarity and international support

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An Inspiring Case of Union Organizing in a Formidable Context: The Case of TÜMTİS in Turkey

A Case Study by Alpkın Birelma

TÜMTİS have set “a great example” for Turkish trade unions about the importance of international workers’ solidarity.

As global firms like UPS and DHL began to dominate the national market in the 2000s, the Turkish transport workers’ union TÜMTİS, largely made up of employees of small-scale delivery companies, saw its membership base start to slip away. The union decided on a bold move, target UPS, though the general secretary in charge of organising Muharrem Yıldırım describes it as more of a matter of survival: “It was so difficult to organise UPS, if it hadn’t been necessary, it might have been impossible.”

TÜMTİS’s success in signing a collective bargaining agreement with UPS in 2011—a victory won after nine hard months on the picket line—made the union a model for others struggling against an increasingly difficult organising climate.

“In Turkey, the legislation on paper has a lot of trade union rights, but in practice, there are thousands of barriers to keep workers from claiming these rights,” says TÜMTİS president Kenan Öztürk.

TÜMTİS ran up against some of these barriers in its first attempts to make inroads at international firms, struggles documented in a case study prepared by academic Alpkın Birelma and released by the German Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in March 2017. When, for example, TÜMTİS tried to organise at two Unilever subcontractors in 2008, a court ruled that the companies did not fall under the union’s purview because they were not road transportation firms. Turkish labour law allows a union to only organise the workers of a specific industry, as defined – often in an arbitrary way – by the Ministry of Labour. Another attempt to organise workers at a port-loading company subcontracted to a dock owned by an international firm foundered when the employer transferred the subcontracted employees to its own firm, making them dock workers and thus ineligible for TÜMTİS membership.

Though unsuccessful, these union drives helped lay the groundwork for TÜMTİS’s future victories. New leadership at TÜMTİS, which was independent from its prior socialist party affiliations, allowed for a greater militancy in the union’s organising work. During the port dispute, for example, TÜMTİS kept a picket line for six months. TÜMTİS also actively solicited the support of the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF), which was made possible by the transnational character of the

companies where TÜMTİS was attempting to organise workers. For example, the ITF supported workers in the port dispute by visiting the picket line and writing to the parent company in Singapore. As a result, TÜMTİS leaders came together with five key ITF officials in 2009 for a landmark meeting on how to organise at large, multinational companies.

When TÜMTİS decided to tackle organising UPS, they drew on this newly strengthened relationship to initiate an international mobilisation, including simultaneous protests in 23 different countries against UPS. Members of ITF also provided a significant solidarity fund to help support dismissed workers on the picket line, and sent delegations to visit the striking union members.

“Our work in Turkey was important, but the international solidarity from the ITF and the ITUC (International Trade Union Confederation) played the most important role in our success,” says Öztürk. “It set a great example for trade unions in Turkey about the importance of an international workers’ movement in solidarity with each other. Many other unions have now started developing better relations with international federations as a result.”

The UPS victory also created momentum for TÜMTİS’s next big organising campaign at DHL. TÜMTİS drew on the lessons of success and internal cohesion to tackle another multinational, again working in close collaboration with ITF, which brought international pressure to bear against the German government, the company’s majority shareholder. The year-and-a-half-long campaign highlighted another challenge for independent trade unions in Turkey: the rapid recent growth of pro-government union confederations. DHL management pressured workers to ally with one such union in an attempt to break TÜMTİS mobilisation.

In the end, TÜMTİS’s determination won out, and the Ministry of Labour granted the union the official recognition to sign a collective bargaining agreement with DHL. Subsequent successful campaigns at the Turkish firm Aras Kargo and at DHL Express are pending recognition. So too, however, is TÜMTİS’s demand for a retrial in the recent conviction of 14 of its leaders in a case dating back to 2007 that is being seen as a threat to all independent unions’ ability to organise in Turkey.

“The ITF is helping TÜMTİS to fight these convictions both in the court system and by mobilising international union support,” says Noel Coard, ITF head of inland transport. “Our colleagues in Turkey often face violence and imprisonment. The attacks not just on labour rights but on our fellow trade unionists must, and have been, actively resisted.”

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