

(Re)Radicalization of the Working Class in Turkey?: An Appraisal of Recent Workplace Occupations

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Autonomy, occupation, self-management... these long-forgotten terms are back in Turkey since late 2012-early 2013. There have been several factory occupations since last year. The most prominent ones are, among others, Kazova, Greif, Zentiva, Feniş, Moda Socks Factory, Renault, and Şişecam Topkapı workplace occupations. Although both mainstream media and the trade union bureaucracy try to undermine their significance, recent struggles of the workers necessitate greater scrutiny in the wider political-economic context of Turkey; so the meaning of the occupation as well.

Antonio Gramsci once wrote that “hegemony is born in the factory.” Therefore, occupations of factories/workplaces, taking control of the means of production and widening of this strategy would be a very crucial step for a counter-hegemonic struggle, especially in an era when the trade unions are in crisis worldwide. And the labouring classes of the world have this tradition of occupation since the early 20th century. It indeed proved to be a very effective strategy as, for example, it eliminates mediations required by labour legislation; prevents scabbing as nobody can step in; and it prevents a possible lockout. The control of the workplace makes the workers stay ahead of the game, and the employers would be in an anxious position as they have the means of production inside.

In the West, factory occupations reemerged during and after the 2007-2008 financial crisis. From U.S. to France, and from Britain to Spain, workers occupied their workplaces against the subversive effects of the crisis of the ruling classes, and had some gains and defeats.

Turkey represents an interesting and a different case, however. The Turkish Prime Minister argued that the global financial crisis would pass at a tangent to Turkey, and Turkey would overcome the crisis with the minimum damage, although it proved to be a false argument later. Nevertheless, Turkey was represented as a shining example with its growing economy and democratic reforms that accompany this “economic miracle,” which could be a model for the insubordinate people in the Arab world.

Class Matters

Things developed differently, however. In the post-2011 elections era, the AKP government’s protracted neoliberal authoritarian rule reached unbearable levels. In May-June 2013, Gezi Uprising reflected the anger and discontent of the masses throughout Turkey. The mainstream analyses, however, still portrayed the movement as a ‘middle-class’ uprising, mainly related to ‘lifestyle-cum-cultural’ discontent of the people. There is certainly an element of truth here. However, both the class composition of the people who took part in the uprising and the profile of the protesters killed by police brutality (mainly students and workers), and the demands of the people (mainly against neoliberal authoritarian practices of the state) necessitates us to think beyond such “middle-class” explanations, to grasp the lineages of the uprising.

Moreover, in economic terms, the Turkish economy has recently been presented as a fragile

economy. Hence, the two pillars of Turkey, i.e. an 'advanced' democracy and sound economy proved to be an illusion. Earlier growth and stability heavily relied on the conjuncture of the pre-crisis bubbling world economy, and, the precarious and overly-exploitative labour regime in Turkey which accompanied deunionization in the progressive unions and reunification in the pro-government unions. The current labour legislation also has extremely devastating effects on the unions and the means that they could use. The National Employment Strategy which was declared in 2012 by the government envisages further flexibilization and insecurity in the labour market.

Against this background, it should have not been a surprise to witness a spontaneously rising radicalization and mobilization of the labourers in the factories in Turkey. Moreover, the history of the labour movement in Turkey shows us that these kind of actions have an important place in the pre-1980 era. Most prominent was the 1968 Derby factory occupation which ended up in victory; and the demands of the workers were met through struggle. Remembering this legacy would certainly frustrate the capital and the state. As it was put by an Argentinian occupant worker some ten years ago [1]: "They are afraid of us, because we have shown that, if we can manage a factory, we can also manage a country." This explains the police repression against the workers in the recent occupations, especially in the Kazova and Greif cases, in which numerous workers were arrested.

As of now, the struggle of Greif workers is still continuing, both against the state apparatuses, and the trade union bureaucracy. The workers are members of DISK (Revolutionary Workers' Union Confederation), which is supposed to be one of the progressive union confederations. Although the DISK administration supported the workers to some extent, Greif workers are constantly reflecting their discontent about the stance of their union, DİSK Tekstil. Their spontaneous and autonomous initiative cascaded their struggle, not the union.

Some other occupations which were mentioned above ended up with a victory; i.e. in Zentiva, Moda Socks Factory and Şişecam Topkapı. The demands of the workers were met to a great extent. The Kazova occupation, on the other hand, represents the most interesting case. The workers started to manage the factory on their own, continued production, and even opened a shop and a cultural centre. The DİH (Revolutionary Workers Movement) supported their struggle from the very beginning, and helped them to manage the workplace.

The occupations are certainly not the only means of struggle for the workers. However, considering the anti-labour sentiments and legislation, accompanied by a very weak trade union movement, we should not be surprised to see more autonomous worker movements and workplace occupations in Turkey. This would also be a challenge to the conformist trade unions. The deep unrest of the working-class against privatization, precariousness, informality and low-wages would lead them to re-radicalize, which would combine with the crisis of the economy and the crisis of authoritarian state form.[1] •

Mehmet Erman Erol, Ph.D. Candidate in Politics at the University of York, UK.

Endnotes:

1. By the time I finished writing this piece, I have learnt that another workplace has been occupied by workers, against the decision to privatize, in Muğla province.

P.S.

* The Bullet. Socialist Project • E-Bulletin No. 972. April 22, 2014:
<http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/972.php>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.commondreams.org/views03/0424-03.htm>