

Turkey: Erdogan's War on Workers

Thursday 3 January 2019, by [STANGLER Cole](#) (Date first published: 28 December 2018).

Turkey's crackdown on dissent extends to the country's fractured labor movement.

If the presence of a two dozen riot cops blocking the entrance of the Gaziosmanpaşa Courthouse didn't send the message, then the arrival of a water-cannon truck—slowly backing up from the Eski Edirne Motorway before fixing its aim at the civilians gathered 20 yards away—made things abundantly clear: The authorities did not want anyone here.

Eyüp Özer, an organizer and head of international relations at Turkey's United Metalworkers Union, which is part of the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions (DISK), shrugged off the police presence. "It's not that unusual," he said with a laugh. "For most of the really politicized cases, it's actually pretty common."

Inside the courthouse, located in a densely populated, working-class district of Istanbul, 61 construction workers were on trial for a bevy of [charges](#): "violating the freedom to work," "joining meetings and marches with weapons," and "damaging property." The accusations followed a September 14 strike over working and living conditions during the construction of Istanbul's new international airport. That day, thousands of workers put down their tools at what's [set](#) to be the biggest airport ever built. Shortly after the workers began a protest march, riot police launched tear gas and [detained](#) hundreds.

Trade unionists, left-wing activists, families of the workers on trial, and a few opposition parliamentarians had gathered outside the courthouse to mark the beginning of the trial. And by the end of the day, they received some bittersweet news: The judge released 31 of the accused from pretrial detention but refused to drop any of the charges.

For the DISK union that backed the strike, it's yet another injustice—only the latest sign of the state's crackdown on organized labor as Turkey continues its slide toward autocracy under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has led the country since 2003, first as prime minister then as president. DISK seeks to unionize new segments of the population and build an independent working-class movement strong enough to deliver social justice to Turkey, but the union is running into roadblocks, from both employers and the state.

"This job site is a graveyard," Kanber Saygili, head of DISK's solidarity campaign with the airport workers, told me through a translator at the organization's headquarters in Istanbul. Reminders of the union's blood-stained past filled the building. Among the photos lining the walls hung a portrait of Kemal Türkler, DISK's founder, assassinated by far-right militants in 1980, and a photo of the 1977 May Day rally in Taksim Square—in which dozens were killed by assailants still not identified to this day.

CURRENT ISSUE

The actual number of workplace deaths at Istanbul's new airport remains a major source of debate. At first, in [February](#), Turkey's Labor Ministry said that 27 people had died during construction, which began in 2015. But after reports alleged much higher tolls—the independent newspaper *Cumhuriyet* [reported](#) as many 400 deaths—authorities published revised figures. Earlier this month, Erdoğan's communications office said that, in fact, 52 [people](#) had died.

In any case, Saygılı said the September walkout shined some much-needed light on the ghastly conditions underlying the multibillion-dollar project, [inaugurated](#) in October with an extravagant ceremony attended by foreign dignitaries from at least 18 countries: "It was a closed-off construction site in a very remote area, so people couldn't see what was going on. With this rebellion, things became obvious."

"Long lines for bus shuttles and an accident triggered the walk-out," explained Özgür Karabulut, head of the DISK construction union, recently released from prison and now facing trial with 60 others for his role in the strike. "But occupational murders, unhealthy food, dirty dormitories, unpaid wages and other inhumane conditions were also responsible for the uprising.... It's the employers who should be on trial, not us."

On the other hand, Saygılı said the strike's high profile also explains the government's heavy-handed response. "This rebellion at the airport could become an example for other workers across the country because it was such a visible event," he said. "The government doesn't want this and so they're sending a message to the others that you cannot rebel like that."

In addition to union leaders, *The Nation* reached out to the workers facing charges through their lawyer, but did not receive a response by the time of publication.

"[This case] is very typical of a lot of things we're seeing in Turkey," said Andrew Gardner, Turkey strategy and research manager for Amnesty International, which has followed and criticized the prosecution against the airport workers. "If you talk about journalists, human-rights activists, political activists, trade unionists, it's essentially the same thing. Dissent, in any peaceful or legitimate form that it might take, is now dangerous in Turkey. Criticizing the government, advocating for a different policy approach, whichever way you name it, is under threat in Turkey."

By now, the facts are well-known among critics of Erdoğan. Turkey is the world's leading jailer of journalists, [holding](#) more than a quarter of all those detained worldwide. On the [latest](#) Press Freedom Index, the country ranks 157 out of 180, below Myanmar and Russia. Political activists increasingly face repression and prison time, especially those with sympathy to the Kurdish cause. Most famously, the head of the left-wing, pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtaş, has been in jail [since](#) 2016, on trial for terrorism-related charges. (He still won 8 percent of the vote in this year's presidential election from his cell.)

At the same time, labor activists face blowback of their own for making basic bread-and-butter demands at the workplace. For the last three years, the International Trade Union Confederation Turkey has labeled Turkey one of the world's "ten worst countries for workers," a distinction matched only by Colombia and Guatemala. As the [report](#) put it, Turkey has "no guarantee of rights," with firings and detentions of union activists all too common.

The country's worker protections are extremely weak to begin with. The foundations of labor law

date back to the 1980 coup, when a military junta seized power and governed for three years. As Eyüp Özer of DISK put it, “it’s like if Spain was using labor law written by Franco.” To bargain with employers, Turkish unions [must](#) represent 1 percent of workers in the relevant economic sector as well as a majority of the total number of employees at the workplace. That forces unions to either play soft with management or face down a barrage of employer opposition. Strikes, meanwhile, are only permissible in the case of a bargaining impasse. Under these circumstances, only [about](#) 10 percent of workers belong to unions, according to the government—though the actual rate is likely lower, since the official figures only cover workers enrolled in Social Security. Meanwhile, only about 4 percent of private-sector workers are covered by union contracts. Public-sector membership is much higher—71 [percent](#) in 2015—but unions have reduced bargaining rights.

The situation for unions has worsened since the failed coup of July 2016. Days after putting down the uprising, Erdoğan decreed a state of emergency, granting his government broad powers to make arrests and to dismiss public employees at will. During the two-year span of the special regime, which finally ended in July, around 130,000 public-sector employees were dismissed under emergency decrees, [according](#) to Amnesty International. That groups includes teachers, academics, doctors, police officers, members of the armed forces, media workers, and local-government officials, many of whom have been barred from the public sector for life.

Unions’ response was limited: The KESK confederation, the most confrontational of the public-sector unions, [organized](#) small [protests](#), and, in March 2017, two teachers who lost their jobs launched a hunger strike that lasted [nearly](#) 11 months. But the scope of direct action was limited, with many civil servants worried of being “purged” themselves amid the various rounds of firings.

When confronted over the mass dismissals, the government [claimed](#) to be carrying out a “rapid purification of public officials” involved in a vast network run by Fethullah Gülen, the Muslim cleric living in Pennsylvania Erdoğan says is responsible for the coup. The bar for dismissal was often extraordinarily low. Among the offenses: the use of an [account](#) at Bank Aysa, a since-shuttered financial institution linked to Gülen. Or prior membership in unions tied to the Gülen movement, like the Aksiyon-İş and Cihan-Sen associations, both also [outlawed](#) after the coup.

The government did create a special commission to consider appeals of employment dismissals approved under the emergency decrees—but its record is subpar. After roughly 45,000 appeals, it has upheld more than 92 percent of the job dismissals, according to Amnesty’s Gardner.

“It’s not independent,” Gardner said. “For one, the ministries that have taken the decisions are on the commission, and secondly, it’s not conducting a review because it’s just rubber-stamping the government’s decisions.”

Against a backdrop of repression in the public sector, private-sector employers have also seemed to take advantage of Turkish workers’ lack of rights—including globally recognized brands based in North America and Europe.

In April, the largely female workforce at Kosan Kozmetik—a subsidiary of French skincare giant Yves Rocher—organized a union in March, and management soon [began](#) dismissing activists and supporters. All in all, 124 people were fired from the factory in Gebze, about 40 miles east of Istanbul. Global union federation IndustriALL has [called](#) on the company to reinstate the workers. As have more than 125,000 people who signed a [petition](#), but management has ignored the calls. Yves Rocher did not respond to a request for comment.

Then there is the auto sector, rocked by intense labor strife in recent years. May 2015 [saw](#) a string

of wildcat [strikes](#) in the industry hub of Bursa, sparked by backlash against management-friendly agreements signed by Turk Metal. The DISK union played a pivotal role in the strikes at Renault, recruiting members and preparing to bargain with management—but the latter responded by dismissing dozens of union activists. When workers tried to rally in front of the plant in March 2016 to protest the decision, police intervened with tear gas and water cannons, detaining dozens. The union has since called on Renault to reinstate the dismissed workers—pointing to the company’s 2013 [agreement](#) with IndustriALL to “promote labor rights”—but without success. Renault did not respond to a request for comment.

Judges have intervened in the case, too. Last month, 35 workers and union officials from the Renault plant were sentenced for violating the country’s law on assemblies and demonstrations—a long-standing restriction on freedom of assembly seldom used to prosecute striking workers. The group includes DISK’s Eyüp Özer, who, like many others, received a suspended five-month sentence. If Özer is charged with any crime during the five-year probation period, he’ll go to prison.

While Turkey’s economy has [sputtered](#) recently, it continues to [attract](#) billions of dollars in annual foreign investment. That’s due, in no small part, to the country’s customs union with the European Union, which allows for tariff-free exchange. “We don’t have the labor standards of the EU, but we can do free trade,” Özer said. “That’s a unique opportunity for European employers.”

At stake in the coming years is whether Turkey’s shoddy labor picture will improve and more closely mirror Europe’s or simply stick to its current trajectory. That’s all the more reason for those outside the country to put pressure on the many multinationals doing business in Turkey, Özer said: “The EU also has a role and responsibility to improve the situation in Turkey. They allowed this to happen.”

On the other hand, the position of organized labor within a bigger tent of opposition to the government is much less clear. While unions mobilized heavily against Erdoğan a decade ago, political scientist and Turkish labor expert Isil Erdinç noted that they’ve been more fractured in recent years.

“The capacity of unions to influence the more general opposition is limited,” said [Erdinç](#), a post-doctoral fellow at Paris Dauphine University. “As a divided movement, unions have contradictory positions regarding labor reforms. It’s why they have a relatively weak ability to mobilize people.”

Although DISK charts a solidly left-wing course, Turkey’s two other major confederations embrace different approaches. The Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (TÜRK-İŞ) aims to remain broadly nonpartisan, but rarely opposes state policy, while the Righteous Workers’ Confederation (HAK-İŞ) is more closely aligned to the country’s Islamist ruling party.

Nevertheless, [Demet Dinler](#), an anthropology and international-development professor at the University of Sussex, said there is space for cooperation between labor and other actors in civil society, on issues like displacement from urban-renewal projects, poverty, privatization of public services, and gender inequalities. “While recruitment [for unions] is very difficult due to employers’ various tactics to discourage unionization, opportunities to exploit are not absent,” she said.

Dinler pointed to the success of a recent campaign at DHL. In July, the company [agreed](#) to negotiate with the Tümtis road-transport union, after a rank-and-file organizing drive that also saw the European Transport Workers’ Federation and the International Transport Workers’ Federation whip up pressure.

But as Özer underlined, a much deeper problem haunts the country’s independent labor movement: Most of the blue-collar workers they want to organize support Erdoğan. “Turkey’s politics are

divided by lifestyle, secularists versus conservatives,” Özer said. “And unfortunately, most blue-collar workers feel more connected to the AKP government.... They’re supporting Erdoğan because they think he’s supporting their lifestyle.”

How to boost union ranks while also strengthening democratic opposition to the government? That’s the dilemma that will take some serious time to confront—and, in the end, a challenge that likely cannot be tackled by organized labor alone.

Cole Stangler

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

The Nation

<https://www.thenation.com/article/erdogan-war-on-workers-turkey-unions/>