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The Production and Reproduction of Trade Union Autocracy in the Turkish Metalworking Industry

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Abstract

The ability of developing countries to export to more developed parts of the world is often associated with cheap labour. But such very obvious economic advantage is not always the end of the story. A fuller account needs to consider the wider institutional context. In some instances trade unionism can be an important part of this. This paper addresses trade unionism with specific reference to workers employed in large firms in Turkey that are significant exporters of consumer goods to the European market. The union examined is the largest union in the metal industry, an industry that is a driving force in the Turkish economy, and a major centre of trade unionism with over half a million of Turkey's 3 million trade unionists. The particular – autocratic – character of this union is critically examined and located with reference to wider forces of political economy and the specific constraints and difficulties to which its members are subject. Finally, the significance of this sort of trade unionism for economic – and socio-political – development is discussed.

The idea that less developed countries will one day inevitably catch up with those that are presently more developed; or that increases in GDP in those countries will necessarily trickle down to the poor are rightly disputed. By contrast, few would take issue with the idea that cheap labour is likely to be an important advantage to those developing countries which seek to export to more developed ones. Seen in this light, however, the role of trade unions in those societies becomes a particularly interesting one. Strong and effective trade unions might be thought to undermine cheap wages and increase labour costs. On the other hand, to suppose that such trade unions can only exist in these countries in so far as they are ineffectual is only to raise further questions: how, then, is such trade unionism brought into existence? Why do workers tolerate it? Why do workers join such unions? Why don't they quit them? These are the essentially sociological questions that concern us in this paper. Our aim is to address them by examining one important trade union in Turkey, Turk Metal, which is the major trade union in the metal industry in the Izmit triangle, itself the major centre of Turkey's export industry.

This paper necessarily begins by explaining how trade unions in Turkey are organised into several different federations. Then the position of Turk Metal, which belongs to the largest of these federations, Turk-Is, is described, as is its operation in that part of the metal industry which is situated in the Izmit triangle, a key location of Turkey's current industrialisation. Case study evidence from four firms in the white goods and car industries is then introduced and it is seen that criticism of the union by workers focuses on its lack of responsiveness to their needs, lack of internal democracy and dialogue. This provokes the questions that are systematically addressed in the body of the paper: how did the union come to its present prominence? And how is its autocracy reproduced? The answer to the first question is seen to be inseparable from the policy and practice of the military regime which came to power in 1980 and which paved the way for Turkey's shift to export oriented industrialisation and the opening to the free market economy. The answer to the second question is seen to be found – apart from the role that management plays in this process - in a mesh of legal and illegal practices that constrain workers with respect to how they can influence the union, whether they can choose not to join the union in the first place, or indeed even leave it.

Trade Unions in Turkey

There are four main union federations in Turkey - TURK-IS, DISK, MISK and HAK-IS – and in addition some independent unions, which have relatively few members.

TURK-IS is the biggest federation. Founded in 1952, it spans 32 member unions and has 2.2 million individual members. All other federations have been formed by splits from it in the 1960s and 1970s (Sakallioglu 1991). It is sometimes regarded as an American form of union. This is not without reason: between 1960 and 1970 US financial aid constituted a sum equal to the income that came to Turk-Is from its membership dues. There were frequent visits to the States by the leadership and other training activities (Isikli 1987: 319). Politically TURK-IS claimed a centre and centre-left position in the 1970s with sympathies toward the CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi or Republican People's Party). Today it occupies a centre-right position. Its formally declared aims include a commitment to 'a high level of national democratic secular and social and state structure based on Ataturk's principles and the Constitution' (Article 3, Turk-Is Regulations). It is mainly composed of right wing unions but its constituent unions include also some which are left wing, notably the petrol workers' union, Petrol-Is. Turk Metal is part of Turk-Is and is the union, which is at the centre of this paper.

DISK (the Revolutionary Workers' Trade Union Confederation) was founded in 1967 when several unions left TURK-IS, including those representing mineworkers, tyre workers, press workers, workers in food stuffs and metal workers. It now has 28 affiliated unions, covering around a third of a million individual members. During the 1970s DISK was close to the Turkish Workers' Party (Turkiye Isci Partisi) and at the centre of a militant socialist trade unionism. Today it adopts a rather less radical stance but it is still regarded as leftwing among the federations.

MISK (the Federation of Nationalist Workers' Union) is the smallest of the federations. Founded in 1970, it is a federation of far right wing trade unions covering less than one per cent of those unionised. The independent unions cover a similar proportion.

HAK-IS (the Confederation of Justice Seekers' Trade Unions) was formed in 1976. There are seven unions affiliated to the federation. Before the 1980 coup it covered over half a million members and currently has around one third of a million. It is a federation of Islamic unions. It is sympathetic to the FP (Fazilet Partisi or Virtue Party, the current embodiment of rightist Islamic values). It has its main base amongst companies which belong to MUSIAD, the Moslem industrialists federation. Its constitution pledges to 'respect national and moral values; to abide by the rule of social order and rights; to create peace and harmony between workers and employers; to upgrade the living conditions of workers and to enable them to fully utilise human rights and freedoms and to create a prosperous and developed Turkey based on national unity' (Article 3, Hak-Is Regulations).

The Metal Industry and Turk Metal

The Izmit triangle is an area that runs from Istanbul at its apex to Izmit and Bursa. It is the site of extensive industrialisation, which expanded in the 1980s as industry spilled out of Istanbul in a second phase of development. In 1999 and 2000 research was conducted in four plants in or adjacent to the Izmit triangle as part of a larger project. Three of these plants were in the whitegoods industry; one was a major car plant. All of them were unionised by Turk Metal. All are subject to the same collective agreement, with average wages for a worker with five years service of circa £300 a month, including bonuses, in 2000.

The Çayırova washing machine factory is owned by a large Turkish conglomerate. This is one of the biggest whitegoods manufacturers in Europe. The plant produces about one and a half million washing machines annually, of which 25 per cent are exported. It has over 50 per cent of the home market.

The Çayırova plant is situated at Gebze, near Izmit. Just under 1,000 are employed in the factory. The plant is a well-laid out modern one, which has the status of a show plant within the company. The plant has invested heavily in new technology since the end of a partnership with a German multinational in 1986. Metal cutting and bending units are highly automated. There are robotic devices and numerically controlled machines throughout the production process. In the paint unit where metal frames are painted automatically, workers are largely reduced to pressing buttons when necessary. In the pre-assembly unit, most work tasks are highly automated through the use of CNC machines. However, in final assembly unit, most of the work is carried out manually with a minority of women working side by side with the men. In the final quality control, the work tasks are again highly automated. At the time of the fieldwork the Çayırova plant had undergone considerable reorganisation of its management, lean management having made for less managers in a flatter structure.

The second plant produces ovens. Situated at Bolu, it is owned by the same conglomerate. Bolu produces over half a million ovens annually. It has just over 50 per cent of the home market and 25 per cent of sales are now for export.

It is situated to the east of the Izmit triangle proper and is again a product of the spillover of industry from Istanbul that occurred in the 1980s. Just under 1,000 are employed. Bolu was scheduled for management re-organisation, but at the time of the fieldwork this had not yet occurred. There are more long service managers and workers here than elsewhere. Of the four factories Bolu is one of the most labour intensive. Although the company began to upgrade its technology in the mid 1990s as it bid to concentrate more on the international market, most work has not been highly automated with the exception of the metal cutting and bending unit where there are a few computer controlled machines and CNC lathes and the paint unit where work tasks are highly automated. There are no women in the production process. Part of the shopfloor is set up for cellular production but this makes only a minor contribution.

The third plant, at Çerkezköy, produces fridges. It is part of a three-handed German-Turkish joint venture company, which dates from 1996/7. The plant has over a third of the home market, producing around a million fridges annually and exporting 40 per cent of them. One of the two German partners is one of the biggest whitegoods manufacturers in the world. Situated to the west of Istanbul in Trakya (Thrace, the

European part of Turkey), this plant was again a product of the industrial overflow that stemmed from Istanbul in the 1980s. Nearly 2,000 are employed in the refrigerator plant at peak season, which is itself part of a much larger whitegoods manufacturing complex which employs over 3,000. Çerkezköy has recently undergone a major management reorganisation which had stripped out the management levels of deputies and assistant managers and in which the bottom level of management consists of teamleaders appointed by management and in charge of teams between 9 and 45. Since the arrival of the German partner, who appointed a German managing director, the plant, which hitherto had been starved of investment, has benefited considerably from upgrades to its technology. Most pre-assembly line work in the paint section, in metal cutting and bending, in plastic cutting and in moulding has been highly automated. German managers claim the equipment used is the same as that at the corporation's factories in other countries. Final assembly and some sub assembly (where some women are employed) are labour intensive, but with some final quality control again being highly automated.

The fourth plant is a car factory at Bursa. The company is a joint venture in which the two partners are a European company and a large Turkish holding company in Turkey. The company started production at Bursa in 1969. It has 5,000 employees, including about 4,000 manual workers. It currently produces about 100,000 cars per year. In the past production has been mainly for the home market, though the plant's new model is aimed predominately at Europe. It has six main production units: press shop, engine, under-body, welding, paint and assembly, which includes pre- and final assembly lines. Some new machinery and lathes have been introduced in all units and in the press shop and paint units in particular. Most of the work in the paint unit is highly automated. Generally, though, the production process is labour intensive. 15 km of conveyors run from the press shop to final assembly where there is a marked absence of highly developed electronic devices and even relatively few powered hand tools.

Workers in all four plants were asked how good managers and their union were at keeping them up to date about proposed changes; providing them with the chance to comment on proposed changes; responding to suggestions; dealing with work problems; and treating employees fairly. As can be seen from Table 1 (bottom row), on average workers in each of the plants rated their management better than their trade union. On closer inspection it can be seen that they did so with respect to nearly every item in nearly every plant, so that whichever way Table 1 is read management comes out more highly rated than the trade union. Management's own attempts to consult workers and to involve them have not gone very far. The TQM that has been implemented is of the hard rather than soft variety (Nichols, Sugur and Demir 2000). There is no joint health and safety committee in any of the

Table 1

How good managers and union are at	Bolu	Gebze	Cerkezkoy	Bursa	all
keeping everyone up to date about proposed changes (% very good + good)					
managers	78	54	32	50	54
union	60	51	22	38	43
providing everyone with the chance to comment on proposed changes (% very good + good)					
managers	63	35	36	48	46
union	46	30	18	32	32
responding to suggestions from employees (% very good + good)					
managers	76	72	60	60	67
union	56	53	20	30	40
dealing with work problems you or others may have (% very good + good)					
managers	94	77	76	72	80
union	70	68	26	40	51
treating employees fairly (% very good + good)					
managers	82	53	52	56	61
union	66	62	28	38	49
average management score	79	58	51	58	62
average TU score	60	53	23	36	43
percentage difference in favour of management	+19	+5	+28	+22	+19

Table 2

per cent	Bolu n=50	Gebze n=53	Çerkezköy n=50	Bursa n=50	All n=203
manager	76	64	64	92	74
trade union	20	15	14	4	13
relatives /friends /other	4	21	22	4	13

plants. However, workers can see some attempt by management to acknowledge their existence, and how they rate the union compared to their factory's management is readily conveyed by the systematic comparison.

Further evidence of the union's relative failure compared to management comes from a question we asked workers about what they would do if they had a grievance. Actually, our intention in asking this question had been to assess the possible effect of relations with hemsehri (fellow townspeople), since research conducted in earlier years had shown this to play an important part in the lives of people in the expanding cities (Ayata 1987). Interestingly, as can be seen from Table 2, the question revealed little role for hemsehri- but equally evidently, little role for the trade union. Those saying they would take their grievance to the trade union were a small, sometimes very small minority. In all plants the great majority of workers said that if they had a grievance they would take it to management. . In no plant did more than one in five say they would go to the union and the proportion was sometimes very considerably less than this: at Bolu 20 per cent favoured the union (76 per cent management); at Gebze 15 per cent (64 per cent); at Cerkezkoy 14 per cent (64 per cent); at Bursa only 4 per cent (92 per cent).

The reliance on management is such that managers themselves sometimes complain that workers come to them for help with personal disputes, for example about getting fellow workers to pay back debts. This might imply a considerable deference to authority on the part of some workers and stands in contrast to that form of working class consciousness according to which 'you don't take your problems upstairs'. However, to talk to workers about their union and to consider their criticism of it is to find that this centres very often on complaints about its lack of responsiveness to workers' needs and sometimes too its failure to act independently of management. It is not that these workers are uncritically pro-management and anti-union. Rather it is that they find their own union so unresponsive to their needs that the management consults them more than their union does, and acts, as several of them put it, like 'an employer's union'.

Bolu:

The trade union is inadequate. They should conduct a survey related to the problems of workers, but they don't do this

There is no communication with workers. They aren't interested in our problems. I haven't seen the face of the union president

They don't deal fairly in the elections. There is not enough notice to become a delegate candidate. They have their list of candidates in the elections. They are not successful in improving social rights

I have no relationship to the union except for my membership

Our trade union is an employer's trade union and does what the employer says

Çayirova:

I see the union here as a puppet of the employer. They don't have any dialogue with the workers. A union must develop a dialogue with the workers and defend the worker's right

A union should defend the worker's right. The union here is finished. They make agreements in their own way. They support the employer. They don't do anything about dismissals. There was a decrease in dismissals after the German company came here. This firm appreciates the workers, but the union doesn't.

They just take the membership fee. Workers themselves must elect their representatives, not have them come from the top. The elections are showpieces because the representatives' list is made from the top and this list is accepted. Most workers don't know when the election is

There's no difference if there is a trade union here or not. It's an employer's union

I have been here for 6 months. I haven't had any contact with the union

Gebze:

Trade unions are very important organisations for workers. But union officials can make mistakes. The big mistake in this plant is that the representatives are appointed not elected

Our trade union isn't good. They don't deal with worker's problems. They don't treat everyone the same. They are politically biased. They are not open to criticism. They don't tell us about elections for representatives. We don't know when or how they are appointed.

For me there is no trade union here

They don't do anything. But they celebrate birthday and marriage anniversaries with the company. The manager comes and congratulates them. The union must renew itself. We can't elect our own representatives.

The union isn't democratic. The representatives are appointed. The union must integrate with the worker. The representatives must be elected by the workers.

Bursa:

It's useless. I don't think it has any function in here. It doesn't really matter to me whether this union exists or doesn't exist. It should respond to workers' demands.

I see this union as a parasite. A union should always keep in touch with workers.

I don't find this union successful. A trade union should be transparent, and all decisions should be taken together with the workers.

They don't know anything about trade unionism. They have become union officials through someone's help. A union should always be on the side of workers when they discuss things with the management, because we pay their salaries.

I think nothing about this union. Does it really exist? Where is it? What is it? I can't see it.

The above criticism of the union is often focused on its lack of responsiveness to workers' needs, lack of internal democracy and dialogue. The question therefore arises of how the union has come to be the biggest union in the metal industry and how its position in relation to its members is reproduced. Part of the answer to this second question is already suggested by some of the above quotations that refer to internal union organisation and election procedures. First, however, we will consider how the union came to its present prominence. To answer this, it is necessary to shift our attention from plant level to that of the state.

The Coming to Its Current Prominence of Turk Metal.

In 1964, Bulent Ecevit, then Minister of Labour, had spoken as follows upon presenting new trade union laws to Parliament:

In almost all the Western democracies, the rights we are about to grant the Turkish worker with this law were only acquired after long and bloody struggles.... There can be no doubt that by granting the Turkish worker these rights without necessitating such struggles, you will have rendered history and society a great service.... In the countries of the West, application preceded the laws ... with us, the laws will come first and the application will follow' (cited in Isikli 1987: 317-18)

Ecevit had been correct. These laws had been a real step forward. This is pertinent here, for it has been argued that it was especially workers such as those considered in this paper who benefited from such changes in the 1960s and 1970s – namely, those who worked in large scale manufacturing firms that produced inter alia consumer durables and cars with modern technology, often with foreign investment (Keyder 1987: 160-1). These benefits had derived from a process of top down bureaucratic reform however; and what the state gives, the state can take away.

At the end of the 1970s Turkey was in crisis. For a variety of reasons the import substituting industrialisation that had been based on the selective protection of the domestic manufacturing sector had run into trouble. The balance of payments effects of adverse terms of trade, the shrinking world market for exports, rising oil prices and reduced remittances from Turkish workers in Europe all pushed toward a reduction in the imported inputs and technology without which higher levels of profitability and economic growth could not be sustained (Keyder 1987). Turkey was driven into the hands of the IMF in 1978 and into a major stabilisation and structural adjustment programme in January 1980. In the midst of political turmoil, a military coup ensued on 12 September 1980. Turkey was then ruled by the National Security Council. This marked a decisive moment in the modern history of trade unionism in Turkey, and for Turk-Is and its affiliate Turk Metal.

In 1982 a new constitution placed major restrictions on the political activities of trade unions and further weakening of trade unions ensued through the 1983 Trade Unions

Act. Unions were forbidden to pursue political objectives – in particular they were forbidden to engage in political activities, to establish relations with political parties, or to use the name or symbols of political parties. Politically motivated strikes, general strikes and sympathy strikes were all made illegal; so too were slowdowns, sit-ins, and similar forms of concerted action. Strikes and lock-outs were not permitted during a state of war or full or partial mobilisation, and they could be prohibited in the event of major disasters adversely affecting daily life and temporarily restricted in the case of martial law or 'extraordinary emergency law' circumstances.

Furthermore, a lawful strike likely to endanger public health or national security could be suspended for 60 days by order of the government and be taken to compulsory arbitration at the end of that period, if the parties to the dispute failed to reach an agreement. Strikes were prohibited over grievances arising from the interpretation or application of collective agreements. In addition new legislation denied the right to unionise and to bargain collectively to civil servants and certain public employee groups, including the newly created contract worker category in the state economic enterprises. During the first half of the 1980s wage settlements were taken over by the Government controlled High Board of Arbitration, which systematically awarded increases below inflation. In a catch-all move against free collective bargaining, and in particular of the right to strike, the 1982 Constitution had stipulated that the right to strike 'shall not be exercised in a manner contrary to the principle of goodwill, to the detriment of society, and in a manner damaging national wealth', the violation of these conditions inviting a court injunction to halt the strike.

The 1970s had seen the unions, and most especially DISK, manifest a new militancy. Strikes increased as did days lost. Legislation protected workers from being fired at will and imposed heavy costs on companies in the form of severance payments awarded on the basis of seniority (Keyder 1987: 191) and in some larger factories employers complained that it was not possible to sack workers. The 1980 coup reversed the gains made in the previous decade. Boratav has rightly stressed that the new measures were intended '*to cause a significant decline in the value of labour power*' (1990: 209). Nor is there is any doubt about the short run success of this policy. Between 1970 and 1979 overall union density had risen from 16 per cent to 27 per cent. By 1985 it was down to 9.5 per cent and by 1990 it was still only 10 per cent (Cam 2001). Whereas strikes and days lost had increased in the decade up to 1980, they fell in the subsequent period. Wages followed a similar course. Between 1970-79 real non-agricultural wages in Turkey had risen over 50 per cent, the largest gains being made in the second half of the decade. In 1980 they fell by 30 per cent. By 1984 they were back below the level they had been in 1975 a whole decade earlier (compare Figures 1a and 1b).

Figure1a
Real Non-Agricultural Wages in
Turkey 1970-1979
1979=100

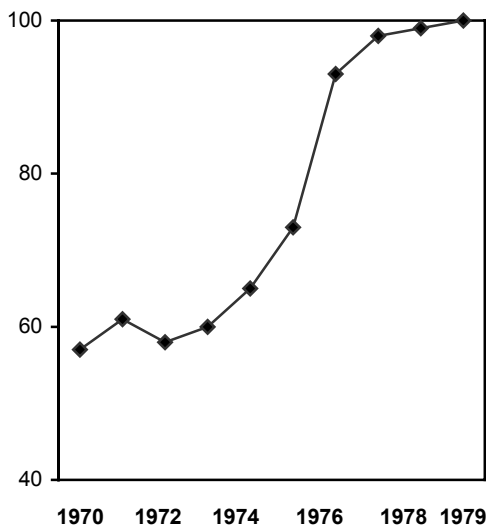
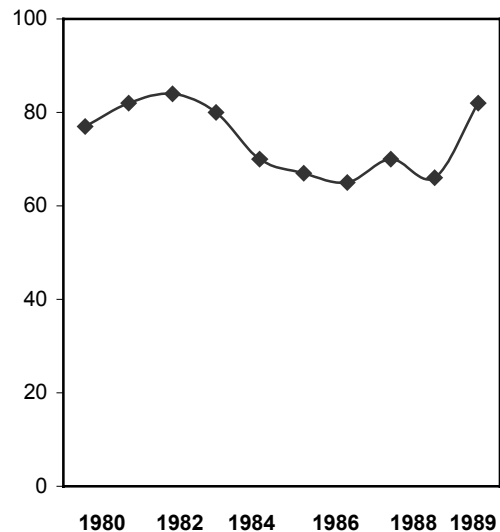


Figure1b
Real Non-Agricultural Wages in
Turkey 1980-1989
1979=100



The political background to the coup is that in the 1970s the position of Turk-Is had been challenged from the left by the more militant federation DISK. When the coup came, Turk-Is publicly welcomed the advent of the military government, and its Secretary General took office as its Minister of Social Security. This led Turk-Is to be suspended by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). But the new legislation was such that Turk-Is also came to enjoy a significant longer-term advantage compared to other unions, and especially DISK. The law conferred the right on individuals to freely choose the union to which they should belong. But what is crucial is that in 1980 the National Security Council closed down all the trade union federations – except for Turk-Is. Although the right to strike was not restored until 1983, this one union federation was allowed to operate again within months of the coup. The Islamic federation Hak-Is was treated only a little more harshly. Favoured by the Generals for its conservative nature, it was allowed to operate without collective bargaining or the right to strike in 1981 and began to operate fully as a confederation in 1983. The nationalist federation MISK was reinstated in 1984. But DISK was treated very differently. It remained banned until 1991. In the meantime most of its top union officials had been imprisoned and its property seized by the state. In 1981 the Military Court had prosecuted 1,477 DISK trade unionists, 78 of them being charged with offences punishable by death. Part of the Generals' attempt to curb the power of the left, the case went on for five years, at the end of which 264 trade unionists were given prison sentences ranging from five to fifteen years (Pekin 1996: 220).

A further component in the disadvantage suffered by DISK following the 1980 coup (and an advantage for Turk-Is) derived from the requirement that trade unions must qualify as national unions with a presence throughout one of a number of specified industry groups –e. g. mining; textiles, metals. In Turkey, trade unions cannot take the form of craft unions or enterprise or plant unions and the new legislation decreed that in order for a trade union to be entitled to bargain with a plant or company, it had to represent at least 10 per cent of the workers in the industry and more than half the workers in the plant or company. These rules made it yet more difficult for those unions previously affiliated to DISK to regain a foothold. In fact, it gave those unions

which got established first a great advantage – generally those of the centre and right and especially Turk-Is.

Each of the trade union federations has constituent unions in the metal industry. Leaving aside here the HAK-IS union, Oz-Celik, which has just under 100,000 members and the small MISK union, Turk Celik Sen, which fails to reach the ten per cent bargaining threshold, the effects of the coup can be readily seen at the level of the individual trade unions by reference to the history of the DISK and TURK-IS unions in the industry.

The DISK union in the metal industry is Birlesik Metal. The union has over 56,000 members. It is the product of a 1993 merger between two unions, Maden-Is and Otomobil-Is. Maden-Is was founded after the first trade union act came into force in 1947. The union affiliated to Turk-Is when the confederation came into existence in 1952. In 1967 Maden-Is withdrew from Turk-Is and formed DISK with four other unions. Kemal Turkler, who had been the chairman of the union since 1964 also then served as chairman of DISK until 1977 (he was murdered by rightists in an armed attack in 1980). So what happened to Maden-Is? The military regime suspended Maden-Is as a part of DISK and it was not re-opened until 1991¹.

The Turk-Is union in the metal industry is Turk Metal. The union was founded in 1973 in Ankara and immediately affiliated to Turk-Is. The union grew considerably in the second half of the 1970s when it gained control of a few plants in big companies in the industry. But then, after the military coup the union gained recognition in workplaces formerly unionised by the still banned Maden-Is. In 1979 Turk Metal had over 60,000 members. As a result of the coup and its aftermath it had reached 200,000 by 1987 and now has 240,000.

In each and every one of the four plants the uneven nature of the banning of the different union federations gave an advantage to Turk-Is and its constituent union Turk Metal². The military coup and its aftermath therefore go a considerable way to

¹ The other trade union, Otomobil-Is, with which Maden-Is merged in 1993 to form the new union, Birlesik Metal-Is, had been founded in 1963 and had been a member of Turk-Is from 1965 to 1974, after which it withdrew from Turk-Is and became an independent union. In 1979 Otomobil-Is signed an agreement with Maden-Is for joint action on various issues. The union was closed down by the 1980 coup and re-instated in 1983 as an independent union, in which capacity it increased its membership. It merged with Maden-Is and was affiliated to DISK in 1993.

² The pattern of advantage for Turk Metal can be seen at work in each of the four plants. Gebze: The Çayirova washing machine plant moved there from Istanbul in 1968. It was unionised by Maden-Is, a constituent union of DISK, which had been formed the previous year. The plant remained organised by Maden-Is until the 1980 military coup. This union was then closed down. In 1983-4, DISK still being banned, the plant was unionised by Turk Metal.

Bolu: in 1983 the relatively new Bolu plant was unionised by Turk Metal which at this time was of course part of the only major union federation in existence.

Çerkezköy: in the 1970s the plant had been unionised by the DISK union Maden-Is. After the military coup the union was closed. In 1983-4 the plant was unionised by Turk Metal.

Bursa: initially, the car plant was organised by Maden-Is. In the 1970s in the context of the strengthening of the left and of violent clashes between left and right on the streets, there were serious clashes between the Maden-Is and Turk Metal. Two union members lost their lives. Others suffered

account for the coming to prominence of Turk Metal in these plants – a union which espoused a very different ideology to DISK, which was the union to which those of the plants which existed in the 1970s had been affiliated. Mustafa Ozbek became chairman of Turk Metal in 1975 and still holds this position. He comes from Kirikkale as do some of the union's other leading officials. Once a district of Ankara, and now a city in its own right, Kirikkale is renowned in Turkey for its right wing politics and support for the MHP (Milliyetçi Haraket Partisi or Nationalist Movement Party). In 1980 Ozbek made a speech welcoming the coup, declaring that it had 'torn away the masks of those speaking of a confrontation between capital and labour' and that it had 'initiated a period of national unity and harmony' (*Turkiye Sendikacilik Ansiklopedisi* 1996: 361). In this he neatly paralleled the contribution made by the body with which his union negotiates, the Turkish Metal Industrialists Union (MESS, Metal Sanayicileri Sendikasi). MESS welcomed the coup as 'establishing an atmosphere of peace and security in the country'. (In December 1979 Turgut Ozal the previous head of MESS, was appointed Under Secretary of the Prime Ministry. The key architect of Turkey's journey into the free market economy in the 1980s, he was to become Prime Minister in 1983 and serve as President of Turkey from 1991 until his death in 1993.)

If the above events go a considerable way to account for the coming to prominence of Turk Metal. They cannot however explain how Turk Metal has reproduced its position. It is to this matter that we now turn.

The Reproduction of Union Autocracy

Turkey has experienced huge migratory flows from East to West over the last half century and a more general shift of population from the countryside to the growing urban areas (Peker 1996: 11). Many of the workers in these plants therefore have fathers who were peasants or whose grandfathers were. The vast majority are Moslem; a considerable proportion of them pray. Attributes such as these are often considered a recipe for conservatism by promoting reliance on authority and unthinking acceptance. Whatever the plausibility of such general assumptions it is important to note that these workers have not blindly accepted their fate as far as Turk Metal is concerned. In each of the four plants, there have been attempts to leave the union.

Gebze: in 1994 workers complained that when the company sacked around 200 of them the union did nothing. In 1998 following the results of the collective bargaining of that year workers began to resign from Turk Metal and attempted to join Birlesik Metal. With inflation running at about 70 per cent, the union had promised a 90 per cent pay rise and gained only an initial 43 per cent. Hundreds of workers resigned from the union and walked out protesting at the union's failure. Hundreds of gendarme and police were drafted in to preserve order. Following this about 40 to 50 were sacked by management.

serious injury. At one point rightists entered the factory to intimidate Maden-Is members. The management preferred to recruit those with right wing connections and helped Turk Metal. The police intervened on a daily basis, also favouring Turk Metal. Turk Metal began to displace Maden-Is and gained control in 1978. As we have seen, come the 1980 coup Turk-Is was not closed down, although though there was no collective bargaining or right to strike. But, with its funds and organisation intact, it began to operate again in 1983, as did Turk Metal as its constituent union within the plant.

Bolu: in 1986 some workers in Bolu tried to leave the union and join an independent union Otomobil-Is (a breakaway from Turk-Is, which later (in 1993) then became a constituent part of DISK). The management sacked those active in this move. From memory workers put the number involved between 60 and 100. In 1989 and 1990 another attempt at a breakaway from Turk Metal occurred, again with the intention of joining the same independent union. Again management sacked those active in this attempt. Again workers put the figure at between 60 and 100. Up till this date there had been no union branch in Bolu but only a branch office about 100 km away at Sakarya. The union set up a local branch. At the same time however new workers were recruited through the union from its stronghold in Kirikkale, Ankara. Since then Turk Metal has escaped further challenge.

Çerkezköy: the top branch officials again come from Kirikkale, Ankara. In the second half of the 1980s Otomobil-Is started to make inroads into the factory but could not legally displace Turk Metal. In this plant, too, the results of the 1998 collective bargaining unleashed profound dissatisfaction with Turk Metal and workers left the plant, thousands marching 3 km from the company's various plants to town centre where the office is located of the Public Notary (who is charged with the registration and de-registration of union membership). Management did nothing for a few days when union officials and the local Governor attempted to quieten things down and coax workers back to work. It then issued an ultimatum: either workers had to re-register their membership of Turk Metal or lose their job. Around a hundred lost their job.

Bursa: in 1994 the company sacked thousands, the number employed reducing from about 9000 in 1993 to around 3000 by 1996. Failure of the union to intervene led to widespread disaffection. In 1998 workers played a prominent part in the wider reaction to the deal struck by Turk Metal. There was a massive walk out. Thousands marched the 5 km to the Public Notary's office in Bursa to resign and join the DISK affiliated Birlesik Turk Metal (United Metal Workers' Union). Management at Bursa followed the same course pursued at Cerkezkoy. Putting its weight behind the union, it threatened workers with the sack if they did not stay with Turk Metal. After workers had re-joined the union between 200 and 300 were sacked – according to management because of the world crisis of that year and, according to some workers to clear out the activists. According to Turk Metal, at national level, 8000 workers switched to Birlesik Turk Metal in 1998 and then switched back. According to Birlesik Turk Metal, 40,000 did so.

Apart from anything else the above account serves to warn us that in interpreting the results in Table 1 it is necessary to keep in mind that the workers interviewed were not an unbiased cross section. First, those who had been active in seeking to switch unions were almost certainly under-represented by virtue of past dismissals. Second, and probably to the same effect, management sought to screen out potential militants when selecting new workers. As one of the managers put it to us: 'Of course we have to consider "political issues" as well.' Third, pro-Turk Metal workers had been deliberately recruited through the union from its ideological strongholds.

It remains to be considered why workers join the union in the first place. Why, if they are disaffected, as some of them certainly are, have they not reformed the union from within? And why have they not left it?

Why did workers join this trade union? In Turkey the Trade Unions Act of 1983 stipulates that the hiring of workers must not be made subject to any condition as to their membership of a union, individuals having the right to become a member of a trade union or not. These rights imply that there can be no ‘closed shop’. On the face of it, then, the question of why these workers joined the union is something of a puzzle. But it isn’t. In practice, there is a closed shop. In all the four plants there is 100 per cent membership of Turk Metal for permanent workers³, which is effected by recruits being sent to the union office to sign on as part of the process of being taken on by the company. The procedure is part of standard practice, it is as unproblematic as going to the hospital to register for social security purposes: in fact it occurs as part of the same routine. Why do workers put up with this? A metal industry manager put it like this: ‘There is much unemployment. These are good jobs. Of course workers join. They dare not refuse’.

Why is it that workers themselves do not fight more to change the union from the inside? One part of the answer is that the union President, Ozbek, rules Turk Metal with an iron hand and union officials are Ozbek’s men. They are tied to the union, and to him, by a mixture of personal loyalty and nationalist ideology. Photographs of him striking powerful poses dominate Union offices. The grey wolf symbol of the MHP, the party closely associated with the street violence of the 1970s and attacks on the left, is part of the union emblem (despite the illegality of this). The union publishes books about the emergence of the Turks from central Asia and about the Turkic grey wolf myth (Caglar 1990). Ozbek is also President of the Federation of Eurasian Metal Workers; an entity based on the Turkic republics in Central Asia. Union officials talk in terms of ‘Our great President says ...’

There are also material interests at stake. There are visits abroad for officials on union business. The chairs of branches can be invited to union meetings usually held in five star hotels at holiday resorts. At rank and file level, Turk Metal organises holidays in the union education resort in Northern Cyprus and on the Aegean and Mediterranean coast of Turkey for workers and their families, all expenses paid. There is a large education and training centre in Ankara. All these are mechanisms whereby loyalty can be bought and retained. These rewards are not for everyone – indeed they are part of what makes many resent the union and the way it operates. These feelings are particularly strong at Çerkezköy:

³ All permanent direct production workers are members of the trade union. Workers serve a probationary period usually of six months to a year prior to becoming permanent. At Çerkezköy the seasonal nature of fridge production means that around 200 people are recruited on a temporary basis. These are often students from local colleges working on placement in the summer months. Indirect production activities such as packing, security, catering and cleaning also make use of tacheron labour. Tacheron workers represent between 10 and 15 per cent of the workforce of the three plants. They are employed for less than 11 months to avoid the employer’s obligation to pay compensation on dismissal; they lack legal contracts, receive only the minimum wage, are not trade union members and have no holiday entitlement (Cam 1999; Sugur et al 1999).

It pretends to be active when collective bargaining comes round. Apart from that they do nothing. Strangers came to work here from places like Kirikkale and Yozgat. They [union officials] protect their own men and *hemsehries* (fellow townsmen) from the cities of Kirikkale and Yozgat. They get them to come and settle here and show favouritism toward them.

I wish this union would leave here. Our union sends around 50 or 60 people to its holiday resorts in Antalya and North Cypress. But they're all from Ankara – what a coincidence! I resent having to pay my membership fee.

The potential for favouritism and an ability to ride roughshod over the membership inheres in the union's internal structure, as a consideration of its various levels makes plain.

Shop stewards: according to 1995 trade union law, workplaces with 1-50 employees can have no more than one shop steward; those with 51-100 two; those with 101-500 three; those with 501-1000 four; those with 1001-2000 six; and those with over 2000 no more than eight. They are formally appointed by the head of the union branch. However, officials in Turk Metal try to hoodwink workers with their apparently superior legal knowledge and claim that the law actually requires shop stewards to be appointed by the union. What they do not point out is that it is perfectly in order to have an election first and that other unions do just this. When asked why representatives weren't elected prior to being formally appointed, a head union official explained:

The shop stewards and the head of a union branch should work in harmony. If they do not work in harmony, it will adversely affect workers anyway. I mean if a steward, who is elected, has a problem with me; he may not bring the workers' problems to me. In other words, if there is a disagreement between the head of a union branch and a shop steward, he could create problems in the enterprise, and the branch would not even hear about it I mean if I don't appoint a steward who works in harmony with me, I may not hear anything about the problems over there. He can even misinform the people who work there, make it as if the union is not interested in workers' problems. A successful labour unionism is based on teamwork. In a metaphorical sense, you can only be successful if the goalkeeper keeps goal well, the one in the middle field plays well and if the forward scores the goal, otherwise it's very difficult to be successful.

Typically the stewards who do get appointed are right wing people who can provide an upward chain of communication to the local branch.

Delegates: local union officials are elected by delegates (a separate position from that of shop steward) who are also supposed to monitor the activities of local union branch. Delegates are directly elected by workers for three years – one to every 40 workers. However, the local union office provides a slate of approved candidates and it is an uphill struggle for workers to elect delegates who have not been approved. Workers report that when delegates on an opposition list were actually elected in Istanbul, the union closed down the branch. In any case, workers in all four plants are not well informed about elections and have no faith in their ability to elect non-listed delegates.

Branch union officials: these inhabit a separate world to workers; and they act as the delegates of their branch to elect the head office union officials.

Suffice to say that to make in-roads into this structure is extremely difficult. But if it is very difficult to fight inside to change things, then what of flight?

Why don't workers leave the union and join one that is more responsive to their needs? As we have seen, this has been tried. So far though such moves have not met with success and they are difficult to achieve (in some respects even more difficult than the predominantly European and North American literature would suggest: Lerner 1961; Hemingway 1978). In order to join a new union each individual member has to visit the office of the Public Notary and complete a formal procedure. This requires that 3 million TL be paid to leave the current trade union and a further 11 million TL be paid to join the new one. This cost is itself a disincentive. At 2000 prices 14 million TL was the equivalent of five days' pay for a probationary worker and approximately two days' pay for an average permanent worker. In addition of course the new union has to demonstrate it has 50 per cent plus one of the plant and 10 per cent of the industry. In addition to this managers (like the union) confuse workers on legal issues. Workers in these plants have been told that it is illegal for management to bargain with another union, which has some credibility in that once an agreement has been made it remains enforceable for two years even if the workers leave the union and join another one. However, the reality is that if it wants to do so the management can deal with a new union, provided it meets the specified thresholds. To this has to be added that if workers do leave they fear they will face the sack. And, according to other unions, if workers do join another union surreptitiously, and Turk Metal finds out, it has been known to pass the word to management and get them sacked.

As already reported, managements have supported the TURK-IS union against DISK and this support, according to credible reports from workers, included removing active trade unionists from the labour force. Management support for Turk Metal is not unequivocal however. For management, Turk Metal has its positive side. Union officials regard the new management methods such as TQM, which have been introduced in all these plants, as a means toward producing a bigger cake. As one trade union official put it:

We should base our relationship on dialogue. The factory is ours- including unions, employees and employers regardless of differences between them. Our principle is: 'We should make the cake bigger and then take our share'

In line with this is the union's practice of leaving management to manage on the shop floor. In this respect, managers at all the plants refer to Turk Metal being 'no problem'. Indeed, it is said that 'they understand our problems'. Turk Metal is therefore favoured in preference to a union that might threaten something worse in terms of militancy. Even in the eyes of management, however, Turk Metal has a negative side, an aspect that in the long run might prove a mixed blessing.

Managers are critical of the union's lack of internal democratic procedures. 'The unions need to change themselves radically' says one:

In fact, we [the company] have already talked about that issue: we ourselves did some work about what the unions need to do, what the union management needs to do, then we tried to pass the decisions of some of our meetings to them in order to make them more effective, more participatory, to make the people feel their need for a union.

That managers sometimes express concern at the lack of participation in the union is at one level pragmatic; they want to contain any trouble that might otherwise well up from below; they need a union that can deliver the membership. In some cases, though, the concern clearly goes beyond this and stems from a social democratic regard to the need to strengthen the institutions of civil society. Either way, such concern amply underlines the absence of internal democracy. But this point about the need to develop the institutions of civil society has wider implications for Turkey and for other social formations that share similar characteristics and is returned to below.

Discussion

We hope it is clear from this paper that these workers' relations to their union cannot be understood in terms only of some general orientation (e.g. passivity/ Asiatic obedience) or in terms of the operation of some general sociological law (Michel's 'iron law of oligarchy' being a classic example of this).

As far as the first possibility is concerned, these workers are Turkish and it is tempting for Westerners to find ready-made explanations for behaviour in generalities about Islamic culture. It has long been argued for example that Islam is likely to promote a static way of looking at the world which in turn discourages departures from orthodoxy and thereby promotes reliance on authority so that employees themselves put up with a high degree of centralisation of authority, this neither disturbing them nor resulting in major organisational conflict (Lauter 1969: 94). Even to the extent that it might be thought that such assumptions have some validity they really do make it difficult to account for the very different character of labour relations in different periods (as we saw there was a pronounced change in Turkey between the 1970s and 1980s). This is why rather than follow this general line of interpretation consideration was directed above to the specific constraints and difficulties to which these workers are subjected.

As far as the second possibility is concerned, there is a very long established literature on trade unions that can be traced back at least as far as the Webbs at the end of the nineteenth century (Webb 1897: 161) and which has come to occupy an important place in modern Weberian-influenced social thought via the idea of an 'iron law of oligarchy' (Michels 1915). Thankfully, attempts to counter the unqualified pessimism of such thinking continue to the present day (Voss and Sherman 2000). This paper is located in this counter tradition in so far as it rejects any unqualified law of sociological tendency towards union autocracy. It has been seen of course that the leadership of Turk Metal most certainly attempts to reproduce itself and that it has been successful in this. But it has been argued that there is a specific historical explanation for its present prominence which stems from history of the Turkish state, most especially from the consequences of the 1980 coup, and from the interests of the

capitalist firms that recognise the union. And it has also been seen that workers' continued membership of a union that effectively denies them a voice has not been for lack of attempts to quit it, attempts that have been frustrated amongst other things by the actions of the employers and legal requirements.

In short, the intention throughout is to get behind the generalities – whether these relate to the reduction of the position of labour in developing countries to cheap labour alone, to generalisation about universal tendencies to oligarchy in trade unions or the invocation of conservative notions about an Islamic mentality - and to examine, in the case of this one important trade union in Turkey, the specific practices and regulations that conspire to reproduce both the position of the union hierarchy within the union and of the union within the industry. A series of specific obstacles existed which tended to frustrate workers' attempts to change the union. The 1980 coup had had the effect of reversing the gains made in the previous decade and, in the longer term, of facilitating a trade union structure in the metal industry which frustrated the development of workers' democratic capacities. Despite this, workers have attempted to bring about change in the all of the plants, so that there is no justification here to resort to what Gouldner nicely summed up as 'metaphysical pathos' (1955: 496-507). There is also some evidence that external leverage, applied by trade unions outside Turkey, has had some success⁴.

If the voices of workers in these plants have been largely rendered ineffective there is no reason to depict them as inherently apathetic and no reason either to assume that they have always accepted their lot in the past or that they always will do so in the future. This said, however, it is undeniable that these workers are presently subject to the power of a trade union autocracy. In relation to this, some further issues arise that have a wider significance both for developing countries such as Turkey and for comparative political economy.

With respect to the development of Turkish society, whereas it is perfectly evident that the sort of trade unionism described in this paper does not lend itself at all readily to a politics of worker mass mobilisation, it is also deficient when judged against another sort of politics – one indeed that is publicly favoured by certain elements of big capital in Turkey. In 1980 Turkey shifted from a policy of import substitution to one of export orientation and the opening of domestic markets. Subsequently there has been increasing exposure to international competition. The employers' federation TUSIAD, which is essentially an organ of big capital, now sees advances in the liberalisation of society as a necessary complement to the economic liberalisation, which it urged upon the Turkish state in the 1980s. The signing of a Customs Union Agreement with the EU in 1995 has done much to stimulate such thinking and to lead to renewed advocacy of western democratic forms. As TUSIAD's Board of Directors

⁴ During the 1970s and in the 1998 struggles DISK had sought the help of unions in Italy in connection with the car firm and in France in connection with another car firm, Renault. In the 1970s the French unions were successful in putting pressure on Renault, which was a contributory factor that helped Maden-Is keep its position until the military coup in 1980. At the Bursa plant, the Italian unions did not prove as helpful as the French unions had been at Renault, so the position of Maden-Is was relatively weaker. In 1998 even though the plants were now both organised by Turk Metal, DISK again looked to French and Italian unions for help. The same pattern repeated itself. The French unions were successful in exerting pressure and Renault sacked less than a dozen workers. At the Bursa factory in our survey no comparable support was forthcoming.

put it in their Foreword to the organisation's *Perspectives on Democratisation in Turkey* (TUSIAD 1997) 'to become fully integrated in Europe, a broader application of democracy in economics and politics is required, and this is a pre-condition'. Such advances, even as seen by the employers' organisation, include *inter alia* the need for improvement in the position of trade unions. For instance, TUSIAD noted critically that in Turkey 'it is [too] easily possible for a meeting or demonstration to be deemed illegal' and 'in most cases of decisions to postpone or ban, no need is even felt to indicate a reason'; it also endorsed moves in the 1990s to permit trade unions to hold meetings outside their own purposes and aims and thus to contribute to the democratic purpose more fully. Such liberalisation with respect to trade unions (and of course with respect to other aspects of life) is sorely needed. Yet if there has been a need to strengthen the rights that trade unions have in terms of their relation to the state, there has also been a need in some cases to strengthen their internal democratic processes, which is the issue upon which this paper has concentrated.

Following the calamitous earthquake that shook Turkey in 1999 commentators inside and outside the country frequently expressed regret at the lack of developed institutions in civil society. The enhancement of internal union democracy is itself a potentially important contribution to the development of such institutions. For to the extent that workers can engage in a collective democratic practice at their place of work the chances for the emergence of a more fully developed civil society might be thought less bleak. It is on just this point, however, that the progressive line of big capital in Turkey on workers' rights presently meets its limit. For it is in fact some of the very same employers who give public assent at national level to increased freedom for trade unions who simultaneously tolerate the autocratic mode of operation of Turk Metal in their own factories. It remains to be seen if and when these same employers who give public assent to the view that a broader application of democracy is required in economics and politics will extend an unequivocal welcome such changes on their own shopfloors.

With respect to the wider significance for comparative political economy, it is not possible to understand the development of the part of the metal industry in Turkey that is dominated by big capital only in terms of low wages. The wages paid are certainly low by the standards of advanced capitalist societies and this is of course a very important factor that induces foreign companies to set up joint ventures. But the actual configuration of production relations entails more than this; it also entails an autocratic trade unionism, and to explain how this has come about requires an historical account of the restructuring of Turkish trade unions by the military regime, which in turn paved the way for a shift from import substitution to export orientation. In other words, what we have here is a specific example of how production in a developing country is effected by political means and cannot only be understood in terms of economic relations.

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