

# Turkish Unions in the face of the Crisis of Capitalism

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- It was only in 1947 that the unions had their first recognition and their activities were regulated out of “democratization” attempts imposed on Turkey.
- Türk İş, was founded in 1952 and has the largest numbers of members in Turkey, has maintained its understanding of unions based on guardianship by the State.
- Following 1960 coup, DISK was founded in 1967 and following the improvements in union rights, demonstrated some positive steps towards hard-line unionism.



- The Turkish working class movement managed to increase the share by the labor in the national income thanks to its struggle under the leadership of DISK especially in the second half of the 1970's.

**BÜTÜN YURTTA SIKIYÖNETİM  
İLAN EDİLDİ**

# Ordu yönetime el koydu



Genelkurmay Başkanı Evren, Genelkurmay ve MİB Örgütü Genel Başkanı

**Hükümet ve Parlamento feshedildi,  
Siyasal partilerin faaliyetleri durduruldu.  
Parlamentoların dokunulmazlıkları  
kaldırıldı. Saat 05.00'ten itibaren sokağa  
çıkma yasağı başladı**

**Genelkurmay Başkanı Evren'in başkanlığında Kara,  
Hava, Deniz Kuvvet Komutanları ile Jandarma Genel  
Komutanı Millî Güvenlik Konseyi'nde görev aldı**

**DISK ve MİSK'e bağlı bütün sendikalar faaliyetten  
men edildi. Bütün dernekler kapatıldı  
Bu hafta hiç bir spor faaliyeti yapılmayacak  
Bankalar ikinci bir emre kadar çalışmayacaklar  
Yurt dışına çıkış yasaklandı. Yurt dışında çalışan  
işçiler ve turistler yurt dışına çıkabilecekler**



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**Yüksek Hükümet Kurulması**  
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**İlk bildirimler:**  
1 numaralı bildiri  
Yüksek Hükümet Kurulması

- The working class movement and, in particular, DISK, were the target of the 1980 coup. The coup regime first stopped union activities, arresting workers' leaders and unionists and dissolving DISK as it re-regulated the constitution and laws in such a manner and to such an extent ensuring restriction of union rights and freedoms.

- The 1990's was a period in which the pressures on Turkey to integrate with the neo-liberal order.
- In the 1990's, the unions – including DISK adopted a “compromising” understanding under the influence of the international union organizations.

- The unions failed to develop a clear policy against privatizations and marketizations. So the union movement could not prevent the costs of the crisis of 1994 from being incurred by the working class.

- **2001 crises:** the aim was to entirely institutionalize the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP's), referring to the "adjustment" to the free market economy, which started in 1980 and gained significant momentum in the 1990's.

- Many practices eroding the working standards and social rights of the working class could be enacted and put into motion without encountering any serious reaction in 2001.
- The real wages declined by 0.2 per cent despite the increased growth and productivity in this period.
- The share of the wages in the GNP, which was 30.7 % in 1999, fell to 26.2 % in 2006.



- The control of the economy was transferred to the market by means of “independent” regulatory agencies.
- Labor Law No 4857, which ensured total flexibility of the working conditions and enabled irregularities to become legitimate, was enacted.
- Under the law No 5510 on Social Insurance and General Health Insurance (SSGSS), which entered into force in April 2008, a restructuring that will reduce health and social security spending and open up the system to the market has been achieved.

- The policies implemented until 2008 uninterrupted, but the process of the integration of market economy has not yet been completed.
- Warnings has come from IMF, WB, OECD and EU to complement the process of integration of market economy
- The Turkish union movement could not resist the process of marketization that followed the crisis and fell into an even more ineffective position.

## **2008 Crisis and the Policies Implemented in the face of the Crisis**

- Turkey economically declined by 5.8 % in 2009, becoming one of the top countries suffering the biggest impact of the crisis on their national economies (WB, 2010).
- In Turkey, the rate of unemployment, which was steadily in the range of 10 % since 2001, rapidly increased to 14 % in 2009 following the crisis of 2008
- The decisions adopted by G20 Summits held in Washington in November 2008 and in London in April 2009 guided the government's crisis policies, as was the case in other capitalist countries.

- The emphasis on employment is highlighted by the anti-crisis package of measures prepared by Turkey where unemployment was still a major issue in the pre-crisis period. Therefore, the regulations introduced by the government as a counter-measure against the crisis largely overlapped the demands of the unions
- The crisis policies of the government have been in the forms of incentives for capital through support for employment, taxes, loans and investment promotion

- Many practices introduced by the government against the crisis have such a nature and an extent threatening the conditions of those workers who work in permanent positions with job security.

- The unions stepped into the crisis of 2008 having considerable weaknesses due to the oppressive legislation and their own structural problems. The different ideologies held by the unions in Turkey were also reflected in the policies they adopted in the face of the crisis.
- The workers' and public employee unions sometimes demonstrated individual attitudes against the crisis as they sometimes offered joint proposed solutions or were involved in joint action together with several confederations.

- DİSK and KESK, which proclaim to be relatively closer to the leftist ideology and oppose the AKP although they persistently advocate the process of acquiring the EU membership, have become the unions, which have had most collaboration against the crisis.
- On October 28, 2008, DİSK and KESK, together with some other occupation organizations opposed the present government, proclaimed their proposed solution in a joint declaration as follows:  
“*Priority must be accorded to those measures, which promote production and employment, make the job security effective, eliminate injustice over income distribution and protect labor*”.

- Türk-İş in its report defends the idea as regards a way out of the crisis that the state must support capital through incentives on condition that the latter would protect employment.
- Similarly, Hak-İş Confederation, which is known for its affinity to the AKP government as well as its conservative Islamist stance, advocated in its Declaration of November 29, 2008, that the crisis could be overcome through close cooperation between the workers and employers.



- Türk Kamu-Sen, a union representing workers employed by the public sector, which is known for its nationalist and conservative line, is the union, which made the most interesting suggestions at the onset of the crisis. Its declaration of October 16, 2008 contained a number of measures for individual savings such as restraining from buying houses and cars on loans, not converting any assets held by the individuals outside the conventional investment channels into cash for spending, not using credit cards etc.

- The reaction of the labor unions focus on the protection of employment.
- However, it is understood from the initial reactions that the crisis is perceived as a “**natural**” phenomenon which accidentally broke out throughout the world, and not as a structural consequence of the capitalist system. Given this, the demands of capital and unions overlapped over many issues such as encouragement of capital and partial assumption of labor costs by the state.



- In addition to the actions staged by the many actions and boycotts were also organized against the consequences of the crisis such as mass lay-offs, coercion into flexible and insecure employment, failure to pay wages and prevention of unionization and of collective bargaining rights.
- The workers, who were not members of any trade unions, also staged some unscheduled and spontaneous actions on similar grounds. Labor accidents and unpaid wages were the major justifications for actions by the unorganized workers.



- The workers employed by TEKEL, the state monopolies enterprise, started an action in Ankara to protest their re-employment as per Article 4/C of Civil Service Law No 657, which eliminated their job security and cut their wages by half following the closure of their workplace. TEKEL action which turned into one of the most important actions in the history of Turkish working class was carried out despite the tough attitude and threats of the government, lasting for 78 days

- Türk İş, Hak İş and Türk Kamu Sen including the employers' organizations TISK, TESK and TOBB jointly organized a campaign, *We Have a Solution to the Crisis*, which was designed to overcome the crisis by increasing consumption. The basic target under the campaign, "Go Out for Shopping" held accordingly is to encourage the social sections in the medium income bracket to consume.



- It is highly ironic that the unions representing the working class took part in a campaign encouraging consumption in collaboration with the capital in such a period.
- A similarly ironic initiative was by DISK Textiles Workers Union. In a public notice placed by the union with the newspapers, it was noted that TÜSİAD and capital class were the victims of the crisis, making a call for incentives for capital.

- The perception by the unions in Turkey of the crisis and their proposed solutions were largely parallel to the global union movement, which was also influential on the Turkish unions.
- As in the case of ITUC, which provided a model of “**governance**” having a global scale, solutions such as “rescuing” companies in the industrialized countries and and creation of a new credit mechanism to allow the developing countries to have easy access to liquidity.

- ETUC defines the present crisis as a “structural crisis of the model of casino capitalism”, not a period of “temporary vulnerability dependent on the conjunctural fluctuations”



- **Conclusion**

- Although some improvement can be observed in the growth rates in the global economy in the two years elapsing from the beginning of the crisis, the deterioration in the working and living conditions of the workers, particularly employment, continue increasing.

- Although the present neo-liberal policies and free market economy are no longer considered favorable, capital and governments exert efforts to restructure neo-liberalism on the basis of capitalist profitability through the policies jointly developed by them in cooperation.

- Due to their compromising attitudes for many years, the union structures throughout the world are neither so combative to challenge capital nor willing to develop political agendas and alternative approaches in the face of the crisis. And this leads to the weakness of the unions to represent the laboring classes as well as their ineffectiveness to intervene with the process of capitalist development.

- Parallel to the global union movement, the union movement in Turkey has failed effectively to resist the processes. The recommendations by the unions against the crisis have become to such an extent supporting the economic policies prepared in line with the interests of capital, thus contributing to the imposition of the costs of the crisis on labor.
- However, as in many other countries, the struggle by labor has continued despite the unions and as a result, public protests for which the unions had to claim responsibility have been carried out.

- Putting aside the arguments on whether capitalism has overcome its crisis, the crisis continues for workers at further depths. In this process, whether the workers would be finally able to overcome their crisis by getting out of the vicious circle of unemployment and poverty depends on the power they would generate through class struggle.

In terms of class struggle, whether the unions would continue their compromising approaches or head for struggle upon a “push” by the working class would be decisive.