

Unions Reflections on Urban Resistances of 2013 in Brazil and Turkey

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Abstract

Turkey and Brazil witnessed simultaneous mass demonstrations in 2013 which are usually called "June Uprising", have been the subject of many academic studies and examined from various perspectives. However, there has been very limited studies to examine reactions of trade unions during the "June Uprising". This paper will analyze trade unions' reactions on the protests and their roles during the demonstrations related to the unions revitalization efforts.

Introduction

Turkey and Brazil are two of the emerging market economies which have global targets and a considerable impact on the regions around them. Brazil is known as "B" of the BRIC countries which has a bigger economy than Italy. In terms of economic size, Brazil can be compared with Britain and France. Furthermore, it is placed as the most appealing investment after China, the US and India(Saad-Filho, 2012). On the other hand, Turkey is at a critical intersection of Europe and the Middle East as well as a key geopolitical player in the Balkans, Central Asia and the Middle East. Both countries have democratically elected governments; Brazil is under the PT (Workers' Party) for twelve years and Turkey is under the AKP(Justice and Development Party) for thirteen years. However, these two countries experienced simultaneous mass demonstrations in 2013. People in both countries took to the streets and set-up neighborhood assemblies to reclaim their city from neoliberal forces.

These protests articulated dissatisfaction of the people against their governments, which has escalated throughout years due to the two government policies. Millions of people and various social groups joined these demonstrations with different aims and reasons. In general, wage earners, blue and white collar workers, sub-contracted workers, workers under precarious working conditions who are members or potential members of unions, participated in the demonstrations on a massive scale. Considering the protesters' demands, the

demonstrations were like a revolt against the neoliberal policies, particularly, neoliberal projects of urban transformation, poverty and precarisation. In other words, the potential members of unions have struggled against the neoliberal policies. In this respect, it is possible to draw a parallel between the protests in the two countries and a storm of protests raised in Greece, Iceland, Tunisia, Egypt, United States, and Spain. In this context, the first propose of this paper is to examine the participation of working class in the protests in Brazil and Turkey, then, to analyze trade unions' reactions on the protests and their roles during the demonstrations related to the unions revitalization efforts.

1.1. Theatrical Framework

Since the 1970s, unions have experienced membership decline all over the world. As in many cases, unions have lost influence in the labour market as well as in the political system. Despite these declines, they still continue to represent millions of workers, and remain the most influential voices for working class(Frege, et al., 2004). Nowadays unions need to make significant efforts to reorganize their policies and structures to revitalize themselves in order to regain their previous influence among the working class, and in public policy(Fiorito & Gall, 2012).

In unions' effort to revitalize, not only may unions restate their identifications and goals, but also substantially define their role in society, politics, and the marketplace(Hyman, 2001). In this respect, Frege and Kelly, in their book *"Varieties of Unionism: Strategies for Union Revitalization in a Globalizing Economy"*(2004) identify six strategies that distressed unions might adopt to revitalize their fortunes: organizing members and potential members and strengthening workplace representation; organizational restructuring; political action; developing social partnerships with employers; coalition building, and fostering international links. These strategies are used by unions to recover their effectiveness. Following Frege and Kelly's view, this study will be focused on coalition building strategy among these six strategies. In this sense, the main purpose of this study is to investigate unions reflections on social movements in Brazil and Turkey in June 2013.

The literature on social movements and mobilization emphasizes strategies linking unions with civil society, where there is an abundance of groups and social movements representing a diverse range of interests, identities, and issues(Frege & Kelly, 2004). In this sense, the issues of globalization and the regulation of labour standards, gender equality and work-life balance, internationalism, environmentalism, antifascism, antiwar, and gay rights

organizations can be given as examples from recent years movements. In theory, accessing the power of the social movements via building coalitions might foster union effectiveness in the society (Frege & Kelly, 2004). Building coalitions with social movements might help unions to win certification/recognition from employers, those providing the wherewithal to sustain strikes, help unions organize minority. Coalition building can also allow unions to express broader ideological and political convictions, such as support for the peace movement or sustainable development that do not have immediate employment-related consequences. Whatever the objective, the function of coalition partners is typically to provide unions with resources that help them to achieve goals (Frege, et. al, 2004).

1.2. Backgrounds to the Movements

Turkey:

In Turkey, the protests targeted the neoliberal conservative AKP, which has been the ruling party since 2002 winning three general elections. AKP defines itself as Conservative Democratic by using conjunctively conservatism and democracy and opens their identity to different discussions from the preceding parties. AKP remained committed to the IMF program and furthered the structural reformation of the economy; effectively ending chronic hyperinflation and providing an average annual GDP growth of 6,8 % between 2002-2007(Aytaç & Onis, 2014). However, especially in the second half of the rule of AKP Government, economic conditions have gotten worse due to global economic and financial crisis. Not only has lower growth rates and repayment of debts given danger signals but also more unemployment and worse working conditions have been threatening working class(Korkmaz, 2013).

Furthermore, Turkish people were feeling threatened due to the attempt to establish overriding authority over their lives. A few months ago before the Resistance, university students accommodation was surveyed with the idea of the separation of female students from living with the opposite sex on moral grounds. The Erdogan Government and especially Erdogan who was the Prime Minister in the Resistance period and now the new President of Turkish Republic in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM) made statements on the ban of abortion and insisting that women have at least three children and lessening cesarean sections. Erdogan frequently addressed regular alcohol drinkers as alcoholics, then alcohol sales were banned after 10 p.m. as well as advertising in public spaces. In addition,

his instruction not to let bars and cafes have tables on the streets of the local municipality called Beyoğlu was accepted(Korkmaz, 2013).

At the same time, the AKP Government began to use more police violence towards their opponents. Emek Movie Theater which was the oldest movie center of the Republican Period, was destroyed due to building a shopping mall. Even though certain protestors including well-known actors tried to make themselves heard, they confronted the brutal police violence in April 2013. The plans for the third airport and the latest project to build the third bridge and naming it after Yavuz Sultan Selim who is known to have killed around 40.000 Alevi citizens who were members of a sect following the Caliph Ali, caused a lot of anger among the Alevi citizens. Lastly, Taksim square which is the symbol of May Day demonstrations by trade unions has been closed on the Labour Day by the Governor of Istanbul. Trade unions and workers who would like celebrate May Day in Taksim Square confronted police violence as well as other opposition figures such as actors, feminist movements and even football fans. These examples may give hints of how the police used disproportionate force and what kind of manipulation was made by the authorities before the Resistance.

As a consequence, the 2013 protests in Turkey initially started in late May against the urban development plans to redevelop Istanbul-Gezi Park into a complex with a shopping center. However, the character of the protests changed quite substantially when Turkish police attacked protesters with considerable violence. What started as an environmental protest to save trees in Gezi Park quickly turned into a nation-wide political demonstration against the government. According to one report, in the first 22 days of the protests, over 7.5 million Turkish people took the streets in 80 out of 81 cities(KONDA, 2014).

Brazil :

The protests were against PT which has been in power since 2003 and has continued the neoliberal policies that had been previously set. Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva from the Brazil's Workers' Party was elected in the 2002 elections because of supporting alternative policies. However, the Lula government followed to a large extent the same set of macroeconomic policies as their predecessors. They continued keeping substantial primary surpluses even though it may have led to reductions in the budget allocated for social spending(Petras & Veltmeyer, 2003). In contrast with the framework of his party, Lula adopted a neoliberal economic program implementing a tight fiscal policy with the modest

economic growth(Ondetti, 2008). The management of the economy in this process established a close relationship between the government and private sector and also with international financial institutions. These developments of the Lula government created tensions within his party and the society.

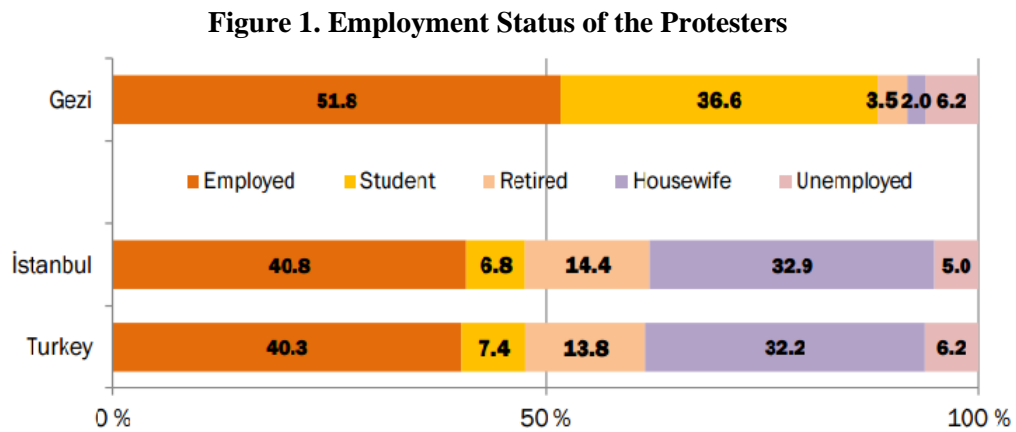
On the other hand, the government started some social policy initiatives targeting the poorest families as Bolsa Família and anti-poverty plan called Zero Hunger(Ondetti, 2008). Bolsa Família was a cash-grant program which reached a lot of Brazilian poor families and reduced extreme poverty in the country(Ansell, 2011). As this program improved the economic and educational position of poor families, it targeted not only extremely poor families, but also moderately poor families. Together with the Bolsa Família, President Lula created an anti-poverty program known as Zero Hunger which sought to bring together initiatives in land reform, housing, health, nutrition, sanitation, education and other areas of development(Ansell, 2011). Even though these cash-transfer programs embodied neoliberal values, they succeeded in diminishing poverty and inequality. These programs eventually became popular and critically important for Brazil's poor majority.

However, there slowly emerged hidden critical trends within the current hegemonic accidents, workers turnover rate, workforce outsourcing, flexible working hours as well as a relative decline in investment in public transport, health, an education(Braga & Antunes, 2013). The Dilma Rousseff government has remained paying massive amounts of money in interest and servicing on the foreign and domestic debt which represents 47 % of the budget as well as billions of dollars spent on building stadiums for the World Cup (Martin, 2013). Consequently, the gulf between rich and poor has reached enormous number; the richest 1% (2 million people) own 13% of the nation's wealth, about the same as the poorest 50% (80 million people)(Martin, 2013).

As a result, beginning on June 6, a march in Sao Paulo attracted about 2 thousand people in protest against hikes in public transport fares. Demonstrations in Brazil started as a small protest against a sudden price increase of 20 cents in public transport fares in Sao Paulo which then became a national mass movement. According to official reports, between June 19 and 23, approximately 6 % of the Brazilian population took to the streets in demonstrations in 400 cities, including 22 state capitals(Braga & Antunes, 2013).

1.3. Compositions and Demands of the Protesters

The figure-1 below which is taken from KONDA, one of the biggest social research companies in Turkey shows the employment statutes of protesters. According to KONDA's research, the average age of protesters in the Gezi Park was 28 while the average age was 30.3 throughout the country. 53.7 % had not been in such demonstrations before and 70 % did not feel close to any political party.



Source: (KONDA, 2014)

As seen Figure-1, in the Gezi Park, 52 % of protesters were wage-earners while 37 % were students. In this sense, more than half of the protesters in Gezi Park had a job, while only around one third were students. The rate of the employed protesters in Turkey and Istanbul were 40.8 and 40.3, respectively. More than half (51.8 %) of the protesters who came to the park were employed.

Among the employed protesters, 15.4 % worked in the private sector, which was much higher than the rate of private sector employees in Turkey (4.8 %) and Istanbul (7.8 %). Likewise, the self-employed (including doctors and architects) were represented at higher rates than the Turkey average. While only 1.3 percent of the population in Turkey is self-employed, the rate of the self-employed among the protesters in the park reached 5.5 %.

According to the same research, 58.1 % of the protesters participated in the protests due to restrictions on freedom. While 37.2 % of the protesters decided to participate in order to protest against the AKP Government policies, 30.3 % was in protest against the Erdogan's statements and attitudes. As indicated by these rates, a protester may have more than one

reason to participate in the protests. For example, 20.5 percent of the protesters went to the park in order to protest against restrictions on freedom and to express their indignation at Erdogan's statements and attitudes.

A research carried out in eight state capitals on 20 June in Brazil showed that 63 % of the protesters were aged between 14 and 29, 92 % had completed at least secondary school. While 52 % of the demonstrators were students, 76 % were in paid employment, and only 45 % of them earned less than 5 minimum wages. Another research in Rio de Janeiro showed that during the march of June 20, most of the protesters were employed (70.4%) who earned less than a minimum wage (34.3%)(Braga & Antunes, 2013).

The protesters demands included cancelation of the fare increases in public transportation, elimination of corruption, high taxes and poor public services and end police violence(Saad-Filho & Morais, 2014). Brazilians gathered together against the 2013 Confederations Cup and the 2014 World Cup and they demanded "FIFA standard" in investment, health and education(Bieler, 2013).

As a matter of fact, Brazil has revolved around massive public funds for the hosting of the World Cup and the Olympics which is a common feature of the capitalist system in the so called urban re-development and cultural investment in and around many modern metropolitan centers. As David Harvey points out in his recent book *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution (2012)*, he stresses the close connections between urbanization and capitalism. He suggests that people should have the right to shape their own future urban space. In his words,

there is always a strong social and discursive element at work in the construction of such causes for extracting monopoly rents, since there will be, at least in many people's minds, no other place than London, Cairo, Barcelona, Milan, Istanbul, San Francisco, or wherever, in which to gain access to whatever it is that is supposedly unique to such places(Harvey, 2012).

In terms of the reactions from the Turkish and Brazilian protesters who seemed to be coming from similar classes, backgrounds and ages. They were insisting on almost the same demands for democracy in similar innovative ways. In Brazil, demonstrations were highly heterogeneous which included a multiplicity of groups and movements with various demands, and primarily organized through social media. Using Facebook and Twitter, people often organized meeting somewhere, and then on the spot marched in directions, depending on

decisions made by unknown people (Saad-Filho, 2012). In a similar way, Turkish people organized major events and gatherings on Facebook as well as sharing their ideas on Twitter, publishing pictures about police brutality on Instagram before demonstrations.

1.4. Unions' Reactions on the Resistances

For many years Taksim has been the center for demonstrations, protests, or any other events related to labour and rights. The unions, especially DISK(Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey) struggle each year for gatherings in Taksim on Labour Day against the government's ban. Therefore, DISK joined the Taksim Solidarity Platform in its initial stages. Taksim Solidarity Platform was consisted mainly of city planners, architects, chambers, unions and neighborhood associations in order to struggle against the projects legally, bureaucratically, and publicly. Not only DISK but also KESK(Confederation of Public Laborer's Unions) Egitim-Sen (Education and Science Worker's Union) Kültür Sanat Sendikası (Culture and Arts Union) Sendikal Güçbirliği Platformu(Trade Union Unity Platform) have participated in this Platform.

Major trade union confederations such as DISK and KESK mobilized their mass organizations through the declaration of two general strikes in two weeks. Initially, the KESK called for the national 24 hour strike for June 5th, however, it started on June 4 at 12 noon due to the pressure of the workers who were members. On June 4th, DISK, TMMOB(the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects) and TTB (The Turkish Medical Association) declared their support to the strike on 5th of June. This strike took place with a significant participation of public sector workers. In Istanbul alone, 150,000 workers marched to Taksim and about 200,000 workers took to the streets. It is estimated that between 400,000 and 500,000 workers participated in the strike throughout the country(International Communist Current, 2013).

Although HAK-IS(The Confederation of Turkish Real Trade Unions) and large parts of TÜRK-IS(The Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions) did not support the uprising, the Platform of Branches of Turk-Is called Sendikal Güçbirliği Platformu (Trade Union Unity Platform) made up of all the union branches of Turk-Is in Istanbul, and they called for Turk-Is and all the other unions to declare an all-out strike against state terror after the attack on Gezi Park took place.

In addition, Turkish Airlines (THY) workers who had gone on strike before the Resistance also joined the mobilization. In the textile sector where heavy working conditions are common, certain local voices were raised during the Resistance. One of these protests took place in Bağcılar–Güneşli in Istanbul where textile workers wanted to express their class demands as well as being solidarity with the struggle in Gezi Park. The textile workers marched with their banners showing statements such as "Greetings from Bağcılar to Gezi!" and "Saturdays should be holidays!" (International Communist Current, 2013). Furthermore, thousands of workers organized a march with banners showing statements such as “General strike, general resistance” in Alibeyköy in İstanbul. The plaza and office workers who came to Taksim and joined the Resistance under their own banners showing statements such as "Not to work, to the struggle". Workers from Deri-İş (Leather Workers Union, Tuzla Branch) stopped the production and organized a march to a company called Ermenegildo Zegna-Ismaco where the workers had been fighting for their unionization rights (Sendika.org, 2013).

At the same time, in Brazil, seventy-six organizations, including CUT (The Unified Workers' Central), the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST), the National Union of Students (UNE) with other unions and movements sent an open letter to President Dilma Rousseff on June 20, 2013. However, the contrast with the June protests exposes the inability and unwillingness of the nation's trade unions and 'pseudo' left parties to mobilize masses of people. These forces have been discredited among wide layers of the population because of their association with PT governments (Azul, 2013)

Eight national trade union confederations, including the CUT, Força Sindical, and Conlutas with some social movements like MST called for a general strike on the 11th of July. More than 3 million people participated in this general strike in the main state capitals of country (Braga & Antunes, 2013). Brazilian workers carried banners showing statements such as "a 40-hour work week" and marched against the increasing imposition of part-time, temporary labour, and the defense of pensions, education rights as raised in the popular protests (Azul, 2013).

It is difficult to say that trade unions organized the labour or play prominent role in the protests in both countries. According to Filho, in Brazil, "unknown persons launched, on Facebook and Youtube, a call for a general strike on 11 July, but they did not think it useful to issue specific demands. The left parties, trade unions and social movements rapidly realized that something was amiss" (Saad-Filho & Morais, 2014). Likewise trade unions in Turkey

firstly confronted callings for the general strike via social media. After that the unions tried to act as an organized labour in the Resistance.

The fact that the tendency of workers participation in demonstrations was mostly individual thus workplace-based participation became very low in the protests because of the unions unorganized position. Furthermore, both protests provided the labour movement with a special opportunity so that they could assume a leadership role and channel the anger, creativity and energetic resistance of the masses into anti-neoliberal politics. However trade unions have failed to seize that opportunity(Karaagac & Yılmaz, 2013).

Conclusion

Brazil and Turkey experienced the biggest protest in masses which began as an environment-related issue and the fare increases in public transportation turned out to be an extensive reaction towards authoritative relations. The Turkish government's plan was to redevelop Gezi Park. It was very much "a right to the city" type of a movement. At the same in Sao Paulo protesters reproduced a sentence "It is not about cents, it is about rights!"(Braga & Antunes, 2013). However, trade unions in both countries were really slow in reaction to these protests. The unions did not act as organized labour and failed to cover their potential members who took part in demonstrations in relation to healthcare, education, labour and employment rights, public transport and others. All things considered, these protests emphasize that in practice, trade unions could find an opportunity to enlarge their institutional and political power during these kinds of movements by using coalition building channels.

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