

Trade Union Activists are in Jail in Turkey, but why?

by Zeynep Ekin Aklar (with contribution from Gaye Yilmaz)

The repression of opposition movements, particularly trade unions, has been increasing in Turkey since 2008. Today more than 6000 people are in jail as a result of having different opinions from the Turkish government. More specifically, since the end of March 2012, more than 100 journalists and artists, 40 trade union activists, 1000 children, 600 students and academics and thousands of activists from the Kurdish movement have been held in prison for months without trial. As recently as 25 June 2012, 71 Kurdish trade union members of the Confederation of Public Employees' Trade Unions (KESK) were detained. For the first time since the 1980 military intervention, Mr. Lami Özgen, a leader of a trade union confederation was detained.

Since 2009, more than 4000 people have been arrested on the claim of being members of or supporting the Union of Kurdish Communities (KCK) that was officially defined as an "illegal" political organisation. There has also been an increasing onslaught against intellectuals such as trade union members Prof. Büşra Ersanlı and Ragıp Zarakolu who are currently on trial possibly facing 20 years' imprisonment if the prosecution gets its way. Through the AKP policies based on neo-islam and neoliberalism, neoliberalism and neoconservatism have never in the history of Turkey complemented each other as much as they do now. The AKP government regards itself as the second founding ruling power and therefore aims to redesign Turkish society as a whole. In this respect, the government aims to transform all the democratic mass organisations, particularly trade unions, into institutions that are loyal to the neoliberal-neoconservative alignment such that they can be easily taken under its control.

Under these circumstances, this repression and pressure have turned towards trade unions in general. KESK in particular has become one of the mass organisations targeted by the AKP government because of its militant position in society despite its relatively low membership of approximately 220 000. Although all governments targeted KESK since its formation in 1995, attacks have become more systematic since 2008.

It can be claimed that this repression has taken place in three ways. Firstly, the scope of trade union activities has been decreased. Even basic universal trade union rights have been infringed upon. Secondly, the target group has spread. Initially, these repressions were mostly against ordinary trade

union activists, but recently the government has raised the bar and targeted elected shop stewards even at the Confederation level. Finally, there is a gender dimension to the repression. In the last three years, the number of women arrested among trade union members has been remarkably high; 7 of them are the female secretaries of KESK and its affiliated trade unions.

We argue that there are three reasons for this repression of trade unions, particularly for KESK, and they are parallel to the Turkish political agenda: the **Kurdish question**, **class struggle** and the **women's movement**.

Kurdish question

The Kurdish question refers to the denial of identities of more than 20 million Kurdish people. This is related to their right to use their mother tongue, and their political, civil and trade union rights. As part of its founding principles, KESK is against every kind of nationalism and racism and has always taken a position in favour of people being subjected to oppression and discrimination. While KESK has always demanded more public expenditure for public services rather than for military, the State of Turkey is resorting to military methods to "solve" this question. According to KESK, it is a historical responsibility to defend the peaceful solution of the Kurdish question. Hence, KESK has always been against the militarist approach, taking a clear position towards the massacre of 35 civilians, 17 of whom were children, during aerial strikes on 28 December 2011 under the military operation on Uludere that is the predominantly Kurdish region of south-eastern Turkey.

Class struggle

In this socio-political environment within which the trade union struggle has been constantly increasing, what is happening in the labour market and trade union struggle is aimed at blockading the trade unions. There is an explicit policy towards union busting by forcing KESK members to change their unions, change their work place, taking them under custody and keeping them in jail for reasons such as distributing handouts, attending press releases, and for staging demonstrations on internationally-recognised political days such as May Day. The AKP government aims to create state-controlled trade unions. While the trade

union movement has been constantly weakening under the pressure of neoliberal policies in the world and in Turkey, Memur-Sen, the government friendly trade union confederation, has increased its membership by 1230% since the AKP came into power by establishing cooperation with government representatives in public institutions and municipalities. There is no rational reason for this increase within the true trade union movement.

In Turkey, despite the rigorous repression, authentic trade unions are in resistance and struggle against neoliberal attacks. In this period, executive committee members, ordinary members, even the staff of KESK have been arrested, the headquarters of KESK in Ankara were raided by the police twice in one month, computers and documents were confiscated. Moreover, the mainstream media, that rarely reports KESK's demonstration as news, took advantage of this incident in order to damage KESK and reported it in detail. However it is very clear that this operation was not only against KESK but rather was an attempt to intimidate public employees fighting for trade union rights and freedom, against class struggle, for labour and democratic powers through KESK. During interrogations, the detained people were asked questions such as "why are you a trade union member?"; "why did you go on a strike?"; "why did you participate in trade union meetings?"; "why did you shout the slogan: *we are not giving in to the intimidation by AKP!*" In reaction to this operation, many international trade union confederations, primarily International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and Public Services International (PSI), sent protest letters to the Prime Minister Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and expressed their solidarity with KESK¹.

Women's movement

The women's movement in Turkey has been one of the most militant and visible sources of activism, composed of various local and national women's organisations and female members of trade unions. The most recent agenda of the women's movement has been the murders of women. The ratio of murders of women increased by 1400% between 2002 and 2009 under the AKP government (Ministry of Justice, 2009)². Women have been systematically and increasingly exposed to violence and killed. The increasing violence at work, sexual harassment and mobbing is an indicator of the extent to which violence against women has increased and expanded. However, despite this adverse atmosphere, the women's movement has been rising at every level, particularly in the streets. Every attack against women should be counted as an attack against the women's movement. In May 29, 2009 10 female Kurdish activists -including the female secretaries of KESK

and of the Education Trade Union of KESK (Eđitim-Sen) were arrested. This year 9 Kurdish women (including new female secretaries of KESK and of the health and municipality trade unions were also arrested.

Conclusion

The most significant difference between what happened during repressive times in the past and the present repression lies behind the fact that the anti-democratic policies that we are facing today are being implemented in the name of democracy and freedoms. This situation has been weakening the opposition and at the same time it has misled the international community. The concept of "terror" has been used as an excuse for any kind of prohibitions, repression and arrests. All opponents have been arrested and sentenced on charges of being "terrorists". Nonetheless, while every activity is juristically questioned, to what extent the current legal system is fair is being disregarded. Besides, the legal system has been considerably specialised through the specially authorised prosecutors and courts. People are being arrested on charges of subjective indictments of specially authorised prosecutors and security department and it may take years till the indictment is proved to be insubstantial.

In conclusion, while KESK is a labour organisation, it does not only focus on problems in the workplace. KESK does not only believe in the importance of labour struggle, women struggle, struggle for identity, struggle for peaceful solution of Kurdish question, freedom of belief, struggle for democracy, justice and equality but also the actors of these struggles. KESK has deepened its understanding of these issues through its diverse membership profile, composed of women, Kurdish people, Alevi people and other activists who are aware of the problems in their societies and thus can be part of the struggle for peace, democracy and equality.

- 1 http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/no_g_01_ituc_list_nov_2006_001gc.pdf
http://www.ei-ie.org/en/news/news_details/2081
<http://www.world-psi.org/en/15-public-sector-trade-unionists-have-been-arrested-turkey>
- 2 <http://bianet.org/bianet/kadin/132742-kadin-cinayetleri-14-kat-artti>

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Further Info

A letter from Ms Sharan Burrow, General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation, to the attention of the Prime Minister of Turkey, concerning the 71 detentions of trade union members which took place in some 20 different cities in the whole of Turkey on 25 June 2012 can be downloaded from here: <http://tinyurl.com/dxcxn68>