



How President Erdogan is marketing the state of emergency

Gaye Yilmaz and Tolga Tören

Workers and their unions in Turkey have been systematically attacked by their rulers over many years. But these attacks have sharpened recently, especially following the attempted coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2016, after which large numbers of public servants were sacked and imprisoned. The president has used the subsequent state of emergency to intervene in workplaces where strikes are threatened; this has become a marketing strategy to woo business. We will discuss the repression of Turkish workers and ask why this president and his policies seem so popular.

From bad to worse

In the last 15 years, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) has passed numerous regulations against workers and their trade unions. Even more savage has been the President's response to events harming working people. For instance, in May 2014, an explosion at a coal mine caused an underground fire, which burned for two days. It was Turkey's worst ever industrial accident: 301 miners died, some burnt alive, and others suffocated. Families of victims and also thousands of workers from other sectors were shocked when Mr. Erdoğan, on the evening after the disaster, said 'These types of incidents are ordinary things' (The Guardian, 2014).

It is therefore not surprising that government seized the failed coup of 2016 as an opportunity for the government to change the Constitution and increase the president's power. The state of emergency which followed the attempted coup was extended for a further three months in July 2017, allowing Erdoğan to continue bypassing Parliament and to suspend constitutional rights and freedoms.

The latest government figures show that 103 824 state employees have been fired and 33 483 suspended since July 15 2016. Turkish authorities have shut down 156 media outlets for alleged links to terrorism, and the press accreditations of 750 journalists have been cancelled, according to Turkey's Press Directorate. More than 100 journalists were jailed in the post-coup crackdown, bringing the total number of journalists in prison to 165, according to the European Federation of Journalists.

All these explain why the president was so confident at a recent meeting with international investors on July 11 2017, as part of the commemoration ceremonies for the first-year anniversary of the July 15 coup attempt, where Erdoğan declared:

Now, they (the opposition) have been having a problem with the state of emergency laws. If it had not been for the emergency laws, we could not have taken steps this easily and peacefully. ... We are enforcing emergency laws in order for our business world to function more easily. So, let me ask: have you got any problems in the business world? Any delays? When we took power, there was again a state of emergency enforced in Turkey but all factories were at risk of strikes. Remember those

days! But now, *by making use of the state of emergency, we immediately intervene in workplaces that pose a threat of strike. We say to workers that, you can't shake our business world. We use state of emergency for this* (Birgün, 2017).

Indeed, five out of a total of 13 strikes banned over the last 15 years were banned in the twelve months since July 2016 (Celik, 2017). Erdoğan's words took old trade unionists back to the 1980s. In 1983, following the 1980 military coup, the late prime minister Turgut Özal also told employers them that anti-labour reforms had been implemented thanks to the military coup (Tez-Koop-Is Union, 1991).

The working class in Turkey had to suffer under these coup laws for 32 years until the Law on Trade Unions and Collective Agreements superseded the old laws in 2012; yet this law was still a far cry from the ILO standards. Worse, the law was amended on 22 November 2016 as a result of the state of emergency so that any legal strike or lockout can be delayed for a period up to 60 days by the Council of Ministers if it affects public health, national security, intercity transport services of municipalities, banking services or financial and economic stability. Thus, under the state of emergency, the violation of the right to strike has been mainstreamed in Turkey. As of July 2017, the number of workers who were affected by these delays has reached 62 000 (Çelik, 2017).

The President's anti-labour statements sometimes directly target the judiciary. For instance, in a consultation meeting with the heads of chambers and stock exchanges in August 2016, he announced that he disapproved of the court decisions favouring the reinstatement of workers by employers (Gercek, 2016). This was a clear message to judges and attorneys.

Against terror or against workers?

Ironically, President Erdoğan and his government claim that the state of emergency's purpose is to fight 'terror', and that it has no adverse effects on the general public.

Beside the strike bans mentioned above, in the six weeks following the state of emergency, at least 199 workers lost their lives in fatal work accidents, which are referred to by Turkish unionists as work murders in order to attract attention to the authorities' indifference and to the impunity of those responsible. Soon after, the regulation on Individual Pensions was passed in parliament, which aims to remove the public pension system by transferring financial control of pension funds to a few international corporations. Another attack on workers was the Sovereign Wealth Fund bill which was passed in Parliament after the coup attempt. It represents an unprecedented incentive for

capital in Turkey's history and has led to additional privatisations such as the Post Office, radio and television, the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey, the National Lottery and many others. Moreover, the pro-worker draft bills which were prepared before the coup attempt were all delayed under the pretext of the state of emergency; including the draft bill on the compulsory hiring of a job security specialist and physician in all workplaces with fewer than fifty workers.

We have shown how the words and actions of the government have combined to repress workers under the state of emergency. The words of President Erdogan demonstrate how emboldened he feels. But how come he feels so powerful and bold?

Islamification of the working class

First, we must note that the biggest success of AKP is in the marketing of its most devastating policies and projects as 'people/labour friendly'. This was the case when they attempted to strip regular workers of seniority compensation by calling it unfair to irregular workers. Of course, this success owes much the censorship widely applied to the media, press and academia, which means that the voices of opposition groups are silenced.

Second, high levels of unemployment (hovering between 10.5% and 19.5% depending on the definition) are used as a stick on workers so that that the majority feel that they have no other choice to support their families than to be pro-AKP. In effect, workers in Turkey fear that they will lose their job if they vote for other political parties or do not accept what Erdoğan [says](#). The AKP Mayor of Duzici thus threatened to fire employees who voted 'No' in the referendum on the transfer of authority from parliament to the president.

Third, with the exception of a few TV channels, all media and press are at Erdogan's service, and workers are unable to get reliable information.

Fourth, the generation born in the 1990s grew up listening to the success story of the AKP again and again. Another characteristic of this special generation is that many of them graduated from religious vocational high schools (Imam Hatip high schools). With these schools, AKP has been trying to increase its electoral base by favouring the emergence of a 'religious generation'. The number of such schools has been multiplied by four between 2002 and 2016, while during the same period the number of students enrolled has skyrocketed, from 71 100 to 870 000.

The repression of labour in Turkey has dramatically increased in the wake of the failed 2016 coup, as it did after the 1980 coup. The political instrumentalisation of the 'war on terror' to crush workers and unions has not yet been met with substantive resistance. This results from the intersection of several issues: high levels of unemployment, a younger generation educated in religious vocational high schools and seduced by stories of economic success floated by the ruling party and, crucially, the reduced access to independent broadcast media as these are closed down and editors and journalists are arrested and jailed.

Yet, neither consecutive military coups nor the government's

subsequent manipulation of the state of emergency are inevitable. We hope that workers will soon awake from their slumber.

Gaye Yilmaz is a part-time scholar at Bogazici UNI, Istanbul.

Tolga Tören completed two master's degree(s), the first at Marmara University Institute of Social Sciences Department of Development Economics and Economic Growth (DDEEG), and the second at GLU in the University of the Witwatersrand. He went on to complete his PhD in DDEEG. Having been one of the signatories of a petition entitled "We will not be party to this crime" by the Academics for Peace Initiative in January 2016 he was dismissed from his position at Mersin University and from all public duties in Turkey by the Turkish government. As of May 2017, he conducts his studies at the International Centre for Development and Decent Work (ICDD) of the University of Kassel as a scholar at risk.

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Society, Work
& Development Institute
'the making and unmaking of social order'

SWOP, University of the Witwatersrand

Contact the editors for
questions or contributions:

Nicolas Pons-Vignon
Nicolas.Pons-Vignon@wits.ac.za

Mbuso Nkosi
Mbuso.Nkosi@global-labour-university.org