

THE NEW THRESHOLD IN TURKEY LABOR MOVEMENT: TEKEL WORKER RESISTANCE

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Abstract

Tekel worker resistance have taken the form of a “Struggle of Right”; against “Insecure Working” which is the new weapon of neo-liberal policies in labor abuse, getting beyond the limits of traditional union struggle. Therefore it is no coincidence that Tekel workers kept on saying the motto of “Secured Future” during their resistance which lasted 78 days.

With their demand of “Secured Future”, Tekel workers have opened path for struggle not just for themselves but for all unsecured workers. When this resistance is compared with worker movements after 1980, we can say that it has importance in three main points. These are; relatively new demands of Tekel workers in the sense of Turkey working class, the effect of resistance on social basis and reminding workers that they are a “class” which they have begun to forget and have common destiny.

In our study, while searching answers to questions such as “How Tekel Resistance should be evaluated in this period?”, “What is the importance of this resistance especially for the working class who have retired into their shell especially after 1980?” we will also try to determine whether Tekel resistance is a hope, a solution, a starting point for worker movements which was eroded in structural change.

Keywords: Tekel worker resistance, unsecured working, struggle for right, neo-liberal policies, abuse of labor

Introduction

The Tekel resistance has crossed the borders of the traditional syndicate struggle and has formed itself into a “Struggle of Right” against “Unsecure Working” which is the new weapon of Neo-Liberal politics in exploitation of work. In this regard the slogan of “A Secure Future” harped on by the Tekel workers during the resistance which lasted 78 days is not coincidence.

Against the imposition of flexible working hours by Capitalism, making up an excuse for global competition conditions, and sentencing labors to unsecure works, the Tekel workers have opened a path to fight not only to themselves but also for all unsecured labors, demanding “Secure Future”. Compared with the labor movements of the era after the coup in 1980, it can be said that this resistance is of importance for the Turkish Working Class at three basic aspects. These are: The demands which can be considered new concerning the Turkish working class, the social impact resulting from the resistance and remembering that they are a “class” with joint demands and fates.

The Tekel workers have accomplished with the resistance which started on December 15, 2009 and ended on March 02, 2010, the most important labor fight of the last 20 years.

The working class tended to concede the situation oppressed by neo-liberal policies which had speeded up in the last years. The Unions tended more to protect the current achievements rather than acting with an attitude against the conditions which gave ground to flexible and unsecure working, non-unionization and work exploitation. From this point of view the Tekel Worker Resistance has drawn a new path for the Turkish Labor Movement. This path has become more concrete as struggle of rights unsecure working launched by neo-liberal policies and which had tied the working class in knots. With the pressure created from the base, the Tekel Worker Movement has also directed Union leaders to this issue.

Despite all these positive aspects it is hard to say that the Tekel Resistance has been realized with further achievements. The resistance had arisen from traditional union bases but has, within time, resisted to the barriers of this base. Looking to the results, it can be considered promising that the workers answered harshly and with determination against some union leaders’ submissive approach both ideologically and practically. The end of this resistance which has an important place in the history of the Turkish labor movement has not been as successful as the resistance period itself. The most distinctive achievement for the workers is that they have realized that they share the same fate and by experience and that now they have a concrete picture of the

concept of class notion. Concerning the Turkish workers, it is important because it has opened a new path in the struggle against neo-liberal policies.

Neo-liberal Policies and A Tendency To Insecure Working Conditions Worldwide

Neo-liberal policies have made their mark in the global economic politics in the eighties. Upon the oil crisis in the seventies along with the acceleration of globalization as of the eighties, the capitalism arranged with social welfare states tied to Keynesian policies has started to give place to liberal capitalism shaped with neo-liberal policies. In this period, impositions such as competition resulting from the expansion of the International trade volume, innovations in technological development, the market economics of neo-liberalism, economic efficiency and individual freedom has shaped the working relations again (İnaç ve Demiray, 2004).

In this context, due to the increase in the number of white collars and on the contrary the decrease of the blue-collars as a result of the transition of employment from Industry to Service business, the change of business organizations in line with technological development, increasing unemployment, implementation of flexible production methods and flexible management techniques, replacement of collective expectations with individual expectations, and the increase of employer initiatives in workplaces cause a loss of power of unions and further, (Kocabaş, 2004) the labor market conditions have changed rapidly against the workers.

Again in this era, the government has, with a limited state approach as stipulated by neo-liberalism, left the stage in terms of economy to the private sector. The government has taken the role of the night watchman as it is the case in classic liberalism. In this regard, the basic function of the government is that the government is obliged to enable the markets to work completely. In this context in many countries led by England privatization policies have accelerated (İnaç ve Demiray, 2004) and so, the era of intervening state has ended.

It has to be noted that another result created by these developments has been “insecurity in the working conditions” and this insecurity has been a problem involving the whole working class (Çakır, 2006).

Neo-Liberal Policies, Privatizations and Insecure Working Conditions In Turkey

In Turkey, the Keynesian policies which have been implemented since the sixties have been replaced with neo-liberal policies by the decisions taken on January 24, 1980. The main principle of these decisions was to achieve capital accumulation and economical growth. In this context an economical growth has been aimed with these decisions, instead of a social economic development. A free syndicate approach and collective negotiation principles have not taken place enough in these decisions (Tokol, 1994).

In this period Turkey had transformed from import-substituting industrialization to a substituting industrialization towards export. The only way to compete with international capital under export based industrialization was low labor costs (Koç, 2008). On the other hand the next important principle of the January 24 decisions was the rapid liquidation of public economic enterprises belonging to the government which meant privatization (Kutal, 2005).

It has to be noted that the integration process to the world economy which had started with the January 24 decisions has continued with the coup of September 12, 1980. Because a necessary ground had to be established in order to implement the January 24 decisions and with this coup all barriers in before the free market economy and privatization had been eliminated (Çolak, 2008).

With this period in Turkey, privatizations have accelerated especially with the nineties. One reason for this was the huge increase in the manpower costs resulting from the collective agreements in the public sector concluded in 1989 and 1991. In this period in some corporations rationalization of privatization has been attempted for the reason that labor costs have exceeded the created added value. Another reason behind the acceleration of privatization is the pressure for privatization by the USA and other European countries demanding privatization; sometimes directly and sometimes through the World Bank and IMF (Independent Social Scientists, 2011)

In this regard, one of the privatized corporations in Turkey was Tekel. Having been added to the scope of privatization by the high Board of Privatization in 2001 first the alcoholic beverages section and then the cigarette production section has been privatized. With these realized privatizations the Tekel workers have been sentenced to an insecure working form specified as 4/C.

A Resistance Of 78 Days For Secure Future

The decisions leading to the debarment of the Tekel workers and to the distribution to other facilities with 4/C status has increased the discontent and their rightful response of the workers, day by day. Looking from this point of view, what did working in the 4/C status mean for the Tekel workers?

In the sentences of article C of clause 4 of the civil servants law nr. 657 relating to temporary staff it is said that: the personnel shall be work with a low salary without taking into respect his/her previous salaries, the working period shall be between 4 to 10 months, the worker shall have a vacation pay of only one day per month, the worker shall have a sick leave of only five days annually, in case of an illness exceeding five days no payment shall be instructed from the insurance, the worker shall not be able to work in any job other than the current job, therefore the worker shall work for a period of maximum 10 months and shall not work for the rest of months.

Beyond these conditions, the 4/C personnel neither could join servant or labor unions, nor could benefit from collective agreement rights (Türkmen, 2012). The temporary personnel implementation developed in scope with privatization has been imposed to the Tekel workers, too. However the Tekel workers expressly stated that they are not aggrieved by privatization but aggrieved by close-out. The Tekel workers have objected against the fact that they had been shown as privatization aggrieves and that they have been requested to work under 4/C status and have stated rightfully that they should be transferred to other public corporations, having been paid all their personal benefits. The action decision having been taken for the fulfillment of their demand has been announced to the general public through the Tekgıda-İş Union on December 14, 2009. (Türk-İş Özel Sayı, 2010). This 78-days adventure in the frost of Ankara has started with this declaration. Many Tekel workers started their journey from all around Turkey to Ankara and has gathered in front of the AKP Head Office with the slogans against working under 4/C status and against the AKP government on December 15 (Türk-İş Özel Sayı, 2010).

At the end of the first day the workers had been brought to the Ankara Sports Hall and it has been arranged that they could spend the night here. The next day the Tekel workers which headed to the AKP Head Office in order to continue their action had confronted Police intervention and they had to wait in the Abdi İpekçi Park. In the meantime participation to the demonstration had continued also the second day and many political parties and non-governmental organization had shown their supports by declarations and visits. The third day, the Tekel workers had confronted

another brutal police intervention and many workers have been affected physically. Many union leaders and Tekel workers have been taken into custody. Unions, political parties, non-governmental organizations have expressed their response to this brutal intervention with declarations (Türk-İş Özel Sayı 2010).

On December 19, female workers have demonstrated against the government and 4/C and have marched from the Türk-İş head Office until the Sakarya Avenue. On December 23, decision for a permanent action has been taken and it had been announced that the resistance of the Tekel workers would last until their requests would have been accepted.

A “work stop strike for 1 hour” has been made due to a decision taken on December 25 and DISK and KESK had supported this action. On December 29, a letter of request consisting of 12 clauses and containing different issues from informal economy to subcontractor worker employment, from severance pays to social security, from 4/C to other employment types, had been sent to the TBMM-Grand National Assembly of Turkey (Türk- İş Özel Sayı, 2010 & Türkmen, 2012).

With this letter sent, the area of interest and impact of the resistance had expanded. The interest to the resistance of the Tekel workers had increased day by day, the solidarity of the resistance had been reflected in all ways, lots of organized and unorganized circles had joined this movement. The resistance had come to its first fruition on January 01, the at-that-time Minister of employment and Social Security Ömer Dinçer declared that the conditions of 4/C status had been improved and asked the workers to end their resistance and to go back to their daily lives. The new arrangements had not been accepted by the Tekel workers and it has been repeated that the resistance would continue until all demands would be fulfilled. On January 6, Tekgıda- İş union conducted a referendum on whether the resistance should continue or not and the Tekel workers had shown their determination again by a high participation rate and with majority. (Türk- İş Özel Sayı, 2010)

While the resistance was continuing the support was not limited nationally and supports from different international circles had increased, too. During this period another decision which would increase the participation significantly had been taken and all Tekel workers had been called to gather in Ankara on January 14 in order to join a 3-days sitting action starting on January 15 which would turn into a hunger strike in case of non-acceptance of their requests, on January 19.

Despite massive blockades and interventions Tekel workers from all around Turkey had arrived in Ankara on January 14 and had prepared the sitting action which would last for 3 days and further on January 19, had initiated a hunger strike based on a three-day period and in groups alternately.

Maintaining their rightful struggle under heavy winter conditions the Tekel labors have been affected more and more by these conditions but the sturdy determination and unity shown has not only identic with the Tekel workers but also spread out to other fields country wide. With the support of the shopkeepers in the Sakarya Avenue, the citizen of Ankara, students, non-governemntal organizations, medical personnel and other circles to the block of tents the resistance marked its place in history. As the governorship of Ankara expressed that the tents should be removed claiming that they disturb the environment the same governorship had to step back against the reply of the shopkeepers and citizens. (Türk- İş Özel Sayı, 2010)

Despite the fact that by this block of tents, the spirit of solidarity has spread all over the country the importance of unity and class notion the negotiations with the government have been insufficient by means of gaining achievements and despite the new arrangements the expected reply did not come from the government. Statements of the government of improvements in 4/C which includes the payment of severance pays and the raise of vacation pays up to 22 days had been refused by union branch leaders on February 1. Following, on February 4 a general strike decision had been taken which would be supported by Türk-İş, DİSK, KESK, Hak-iŞ, Memur-Sen, Türkiye Kamu-Sen. This decision would be of very importance by means of the crowds achieved in the Turkish labor movement. Even if the general strike has not been huge as expected due to the resigning Hak-İş and Memur-Sen the realized collective action notion has been important for the future of the labor movement despite the negative conditions, in terms of organization (Türk-İş Özel Sayı, 2010 & Türkmen, 2012 & Kaderoğlu- Bulut, 2010).

After this strike many negotiations have been held with the government and many action decisions have been taken and an application to the state council for the cancellation of the terms of 4/C application had been filed. Despite the positive developments through these attempts the non-achievement of the main request did put the patience of the workers. On February 23, Mustafa Türkel, general secretary of Türk-İş and Leader of the Tekgıda-İş union has declared his resignation from his duty in Türk-İş. The response behind this resignation has been questioned in different ways however Türkel, stated that he would declare his resignation reasons on March 2.

On March 1, one day before the deadline for application to transfer to 4/C, the state council has stopped the period of 30 days given to the workers for transfer to 4/C. Upon this decision Mustafa Türker declared that the fight has not ended and just interrupted for a period of 15 to 20 days and that the tents would be removed, besides the declaration that next demonstration plan would be gathering with 1000 workers in Ankara on April 1 (Türk- İş Özel Sayı, 2010).

This adventure which lasted 78 days, with its Tekel workers, the collectivity established with the citizens in the block of tents, hunger strikes, sitting demonstrations, marches, negotiations, has taught a lot to Turkey. From the beginning until March 2 on which the tents had been removed the resistance had marked important notes in the Turkish class movement with its positive or negative results, the width of masses affected and determination, unity and stability shown during the action.

A Class Approach To The Tekel Worker Resistance

After 1980 the labor movement has stepped back and lapsed into silence due to many factors, specially political and economic transitions. Even if the labor movement tended to enliven with the spring demonstrations in 1989 and the Zonguldak march in 1990 this did not last for a long time. 20 years after these worker struggles the resistance of the Tekel workers happened in an unexpected form and determination.

There are some distinctive factors which have made this resistance important and has put it into a different place in the history of Turkish labor movements. The main factor is that the workers have for the first time, objected clearly to “insecure working” imposed by neo-liberal policies. This resistance evolved not as just a negotiation for salaries but also as a struggle of rights against insecure working. Therefore the demand of the workers for a “secure future” in the frosty days of Ankara for a period of 78 days is not coincidence. For the first time such a determined and firm resistance has been experienced against neo-liberal policies which have been implemented for the last 30 years. But even if the demands of the workers are new it would be wrong to define the resistance of the Tekel workers as a new labor movement. We can say that the resistance created ground for a different and new platform for struggle, with the impact of the working conditions transformed by neo-liberal policies.

Upon the strong pressure of transition the Tekel resistance should be evaluated as a big breaking in social opposition and labor movements and a breakthrough from the traditional to the new. As the resistance has risen from the base from the most traditional union it is somehow the extension

of the traditional and of the past. But at the same time it represents the future and the face of the new labor movement with its embodied innovative dynamics. From this point of view the Tekel resistance embodies the past and the future; it is neither the simple continuation of the old nor the new itself (Bürkeç, 2010).

Another important aspect of the Tekel worker resistance is the national and international support. As of the first implementations of neo-liberal policies in the eighties up today worker struggles have been conducted merely against anti-privatization. But most of this movement has faded away within time and has not been supported by the society widely. The Tekel workers have run a struggle of rights against insecure working conditions in Ankara for 78 days and have been legalized in terms of social conscience by the support of the shopkeepers and citizens of Ankara. Due to this legitimacy the workers have been supported enormously by the citizens of Ankara in terms of material and moral. The people of Ankara have brought blankets from home to the workers who had to sleep outside in the cold and they have cooked and provided them with food. Especially the shopkeepers of Sakarya Avenue where the tents were located provided massive support with all their power.

The shopkeepers of Sakarya Avenue where also the Head Office of Türk-İş is located had provided massive logistics support as of the first day the workers had arrived. The shopkeepers support which started before the tents were pitched continued constantly until March 2 when the tents had been removed. The shopkeepers of Sakarya Avenue had shown any kind of solidarity, from free tea service to converting the shops into sleeping quarters at night (Bulut, 2010).

The support to the Tekel workers was not limited with the shopkeepers and citizens of Ankara. Lots of big and small organizations and institutions have declared their support to the workers and had sent their support messages. Besides, the international public opinion has taken action concerning the Tekel resistance.

2 730 support messages from 93 countries had been sent to the Tekel workers. With a campaign launched by The International Union of Food (IUF) which the Tekgıda-İş Union is member of the resistance had been known internationally and support messages had started to arrive from unions and institutions from different parts of the world (Birgün, 2010).

The most important contribution of the tekem resistance had come for the leading actors, the workers. During the 78 days of resistance the workers created a major impact on the society and have witnessed the transition in their notion. The workers who knew the concept of “working

class” only from union brochures have learned what it was like to be a working class by living. However it is unfortunately not possible to say that this situation has created a total class notion for the workers.

“If I would not come here I probably would comment as “this and that happened!” Maybe my opinion would even be different. Having been here, I have realized what syndication and unity means. We have joined together with people from east and west, north and south, with the Kurds and Turks, with the Lazes and Circassians. We share the same pan and live in the same tents and have conversations (The Denizli Tent, male)” (Yıkılmaz ve Kumlu, 2011).

When the Tekel workers had arrived in Ankara from different parts of Turkey and had met each other they identified themselves according to their ethnic origin or religious and politic beliefs rather than their worker identity. In the first days in Ankara this attitude could be recognized very clear. The workers stayed away first according to the region which they came from and after that according to their ethnic origin, religious and politic belief. This situation led to the appearance of the belief that the Worker resistance would not last for a long time. In the first days when the resistance started to shape and the first tents were pitched especially certain workers stayed away from the workers coming to from the eastern provinces. The workers preferred to eat separately and conducted their situation assessments after dinner separately. Ethnical and political differences superseded the worker identity.

In such an environment the Tekel resistance had evolved in a different dimension. A new formation had appeared in the conscience of the workers. Of course it was not expected that this change would happen at once. But the hard and uncompromising attitude of the government during the resistance, the support from other workers and having realized that the workers were a party in this fight has accelerated this change.

The workers have seen that their interests, fates and demands are collective. Despite different ethnic origins and politic beliefs, beyond all; they have started to realize that they are “workers”. Therefore, within time this grouping had vanished step by step. The workers have started to embrace all tents as like one tent.

Dinners and lunch had been taken at the same table and decisions had been taken not in the regional tents but in big meetings and by collective discussions. The name tags showing the origin of the workers and the cities where they came from had lost importance within time. The Tekel workers, unexpectedly, started to become aware of the class ground which they possessed.

“When everybody was living in groups not everybody had blankets, chairs or tents because the block of tents had been established later; this some kind of home for us. Here is a real fight for right and worker. At least, we have learned to share (The Hatay Tent, male, 35)”
(Bilgin, 2011)

At the beginning of the resistance national ethnic prejudices were observed. But the unification of the struggle, the new atmosphere of the labor movement appearing under the characteristics of democracy and freedom had caused the elimination, neutralization and transformation of these prejudices (Bürkev, 2010).

Of course, saying that the workers have conscience of working class after a resistance of 78 days would be a far optimistic point of view. However the Tekel workers have shown us that a development of a working class conscience is possible on this soil, and that it is not so complicated as expected. The Tekel workers have shown a new path in the Turkish Labor movement which had become weaker against Neo-liberal policies. This path had become concrete in a form of struggle of rights against insecure working. As Özüğurlu said (Özüğurlu, 2010): In the Tekel resistance, we have seen the new in the traditional; we have heard the first bullet in the last one.

Conclusion

As of the date of beginning until the tents have been removed in the center of Ankara, during the whole resistance, the Tekel workers have taught “lesson” to the Turkish labors indeed for 78 days. This lesson has been a guide for the workers clamped between neo-liberal policies and has made major contribution to the monitoring-learning process in practice. The resistance of the Tekel workers is also of importance in terms of its results.

The results of the resistance conducted by the workers under a firm determination have not been so “big”, unfortunately. At this point another lesson taught by the labors is that the union can be a burden over the labors and that it may prevent or restrict the ground movement. Therefore being not satisfied with the attitude of the Türk-İş Leader, the workers have occupied the head office of the confederation and did not the general secretary let in. Also the workers claimed that some union leaders were not as determined as the workers themselves and have accused these leaders with betraying the movement.

The resistance which occurred from the traditional union ground but had become a new hope for the labor movement has decided to suspension upon the decision of the state council “to stop the period of 30 days for the transfer of the Tekel workers to 4/C” on March 1, 2010. So, the tents pitched by the workers in Ankara have been removed by the labors on March 2, 2010.

The decision of the state council did not bring any gains for the workers. The current problem has not been resolved but only has been postponed to a further date. The workers had celebrated this decision and had thought that they had concluded the resistance successfully. The resistance which continued on a base against neo-liberal policies for 78 days stepped back at the first attempt in favor of them as it could not find the class base necessary. But the resistance should continue as a whole until all causes leading the workers to struggle had been eliminated. The lack of a complete class conscience and the reactive development of the resistance of the workers are the major reasons for this. But it should not be said that no class conscience has occurred in the labors. The resistance of 78 days had contributed to the development of class conscience but, insufficiently. Another major reason in failing any achievements is the fact that most of the Tekel workers and union leaders are tightly coupled to the traditional union approach. A break in this loyalty has been possible partially and in a very long time. Under these circumstances it has come to occlusions in the movement inevitably.

Workers will take place in the society with their deserved and determined fight by the elimination of the pressure of traditional union models on the workers and by the awareness of the workers of their class power for struggle against neo-liberal policies. With their resistance, the Tekel workers have shown that this is not impossible.

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