

From the AKP to the Working Class: “No offense dude but...”

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A classic bourgeois party is identified by the degree to which its various representations of capital and political inclinations compete and contend, and what kinds of responses it produces to meet the needs of capitalist fractions within the ruling block. Along these lines, the foundations of a political and economic system (whether it is a presidential or a parliamentary system) are not free from capital accumulation, capitalist classes, and class struggle. In other words, all sorts of authoritarian or democratic rule are favored not according to the personal pleasure of the rulers but as per the structural qualifications of the capital accumulation regime while bourgeois parties are nothing more than the implementation tool of such priority.

Yet this analysis, based on the mode of production, suffices for us to conclude that all bourgeois parties, at the most abstract level, serve/will serve the perpetuity of the capitalist system and the overall interests of the bourgeoisie in one way or another. This fact, however, should not prevent us from distinguishing the differences among bourgeois parties. Indeed, one begins to see the distinctions among bourgeois parties when the level of analysis is taken from the level of the abstract mode of production to the more material level of social formation and class relations. Now what is decisive here is to ascertain which fraction of the bourgeoisie a bourgeois party represents, and which fraction's ideology it attempts to render dominant in the society. When handled within this framework, comprehending the distinctive characteristics of the rule of each bourgeois party becomes easier and it not only does redeem us from assuming that each bourgeois party is identical to

one another but also enables us to see the conflicts among these parties. This is the first point.

The second point to underscore is the fact that the working class movement in Turkey has been in retreat since the *coup d'état* of 1980. Such withdrawal and position loss, engendered by the frailty of the class movement and the left, also brought along further usurpation of vested rights, and a gradual erosion in organized movements each day. It should be noted that this withdrawal has gone through certain stages in itself as well, but the fact that the 18-year long AKP rule has coincided with a quite particular period within the context of capitalist attacks against the working class should also be underlined. With neoliberalism, under such circumstances, the grand asymmetry in the power relations between labor and capital has become even deeper with the AKP rule. The following is an exposition of what this means for workers and laborers.

Before going on with the exposition, however, it would be useful to note one point as a warning related to the above-mentioned part. As has been underlined above, there are, of course, distinctive features of bourgeois parties that render them original, but this should not mean that the path to “getting rid of” one bourgeois party entails supporting another bourgeois party. Or, in other words, one can argue: You can get rid of the ruling bourgeois party this way but you cannot get rid of the bourgeois rule; you would put the representative of another fraction of the bourgeois class into power at best. This, nevertheless, calls for another individual study.

The originality of the AKP

The originality of AKP, in contrast to the previous bourgeois governments, lies in two points, among many other things, for the purposes of this study. The first point, yet secondary within the scope of this study, is the change that has facilitated the Islamist bourgeoisie to take its share from the social surplus value during the AKP rule. For instance, one observes that a series of companies that are members of MÜSİAD [Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association] and TUSKON [Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists] have seized an extraordinary growth rate among those that have increased their revenues the most between 2003 and 2007.¹ Therefore, although the expectation of the Islamist bourgeoisie to receive the support extended to big capital had flourished with the coup d'état of 12 September 1980 and the Özal² era, it met with genuine political support during the AKP period. Although the state's role in capital accumulation did not change, its supportive role now extended to other circles, other capitalists

1 Kurtar Tanyılmaz, “The Deep Fracture in the Big Bourgeoisie of Turkey”, in *The Neoliberal Landscape and the Rise of Islamist Capital in Turkey*, edited by Neşecan Balkan, Erol Balkan, and Ahmet Öncü, New York: Berghahn Books, 2015, p. 105.

2 Indeed, the members of the Nur Movement supported the Motherland Party and free market economy during this period. Islamist sections, even at this first stage of neoliberalism, endeavored to fill in the spaces left behind by the state while withdrawing from the economy. Yet, they would find essential support and political power during the AKP period. they would find the essential support and political power during the AKP period.

and financiers. Thus, another section of this class has settled alongside the class responsible for the government of the state. This new class comes from within political Islam, not from class sections with a Kemalist, secular, and modernist ideology any more. The education system, political system, legal system etc. have all been reshaped in order to maintain the continuity of this change. The second one, bearing a more direct significance pertaining to the focal point of this study, lies in the fact that in contrast to the previous bourgeois governments, AKP both increased proletarianization and further impoverished the working class while it, on the other hand, has succeeded in committing the working class and at least a significant portion of workers’ organizations to the interests of the bourgeoisie, and even in establishing workers’ organizations directly depending on itself. What Türk-İş Chairperson Ergün Atalay said after accepting the government’s offers during the latest collective bargaining agreement negotiations stands testimony to what this study in fact talks about. He said “If this lingers on, we will complicate things. At least I closed the deal this way.”³

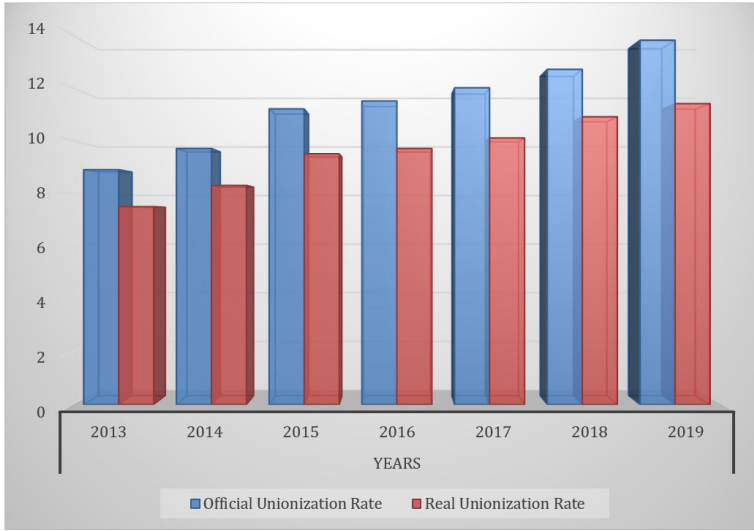
The second point underlined above will be the focus of this study to analyze the policies of AKP, which claimed power in 2002, towards the working class and labor organizations.

Unionization and pro-government trade unions

Unionization in Turkey has increased both in number and proportion specifically since 2010. One can talk about a couple of reasons for such hike. The most significant reason, however, is the legal regulation that was introduced in 2014 providing for unionization for subcontracted workers particularly in public institutions. This regulation facilitated a quantitative increase in unionization. The following graph demonstrates that increase.

³ I am not arguing that Türk-İş and its trade unions are directly affiliated with the AKP government. It would be rather more accurate to say at this point that confederations like Türk-İş rely a lot on their political ties with the government. Therefore, one should not disregard the fact that such trade unions as TÜMTİS, Tekgıda-İş, and Petrol-İş affiliated with Türk-İş have been engaged in a significant struggle for workers during this process.

Graph 1. Unionization Rates between 2013-2019



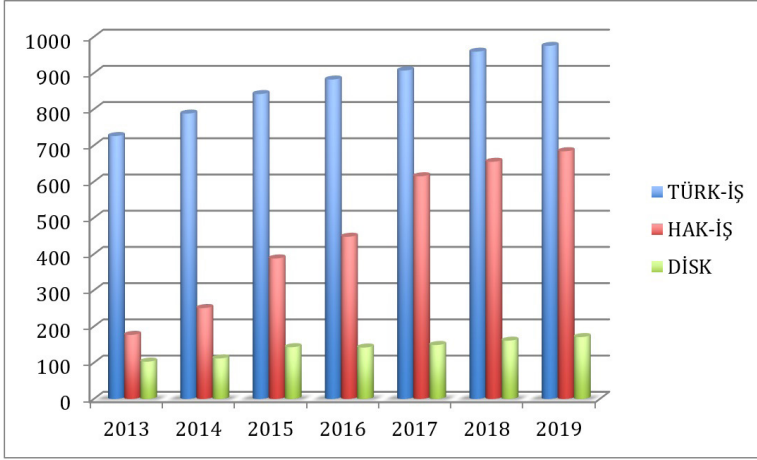
Source: DİSK-AR, Research on Unionization, 2019.

The official unionization rate appears higher as the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services has not included the number of informal workers. Real unionization rate, on the other hand, is lower as it also covers informal workers and those who do not have collective labor agreements. Yet the mere comparison of these two rates reveals that the unionization rate has gradually increased. Indeed, the number of unionized workers has gone up to 1 million 859 thousand from 1 million 2 thousand with an almost 86% increase between 2013 and 2019. When one takes into account the fact that the number of insured workers increased by 23.2% while the total number of workers increased by 25% during the same period, the 86% increase in the number of unionized workers is quite significant. In other words, it is possible to say that about 860 thousand workers have become trade union members within six years.⁴

But a more important indicator for our purposes here is the change in the number of members of three large confederations (Türk-İş, Hak-İş, DİSK).

4 Aziz Çelik, “Sembiyotik ilişkiler ve otoriter korporatizm kışkıracı 2010’lu yıllarda Türkiye’de sendikalaşma, toplu pazarlık ve grev eğilimleri”, *Uluslararası Yönetim, İktisat ve İşletme Dergisi CEEİK*, Special Issue, 2018, p. 46.

Graph 2. Number of Confederation Members, 2013-2019 (Thousand persons)



Source: Compiled from the statements of sector trade union members issued by the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services.

The rapid increase in the number of members of trade unions affiliated with Hak-İş confederation stands out in the graph. In this period, trade unions affiliated with Hak-İş neither involved in a distinguished struggle nor undertook a compelling campaign for association. Thus, the rapid increase in the number of Hak-İş members, in comparison to the increases in other confederations, cannot be assumed something ordinary. When one further takes into account the fact that Hak-İş is protected by public officials and the government itself, this increase should be read not only in relation to undertaking a union mission in conformity with the government but also to corporatist labor relations in terms of the cooperation among the state, capital, party and labor.⁵ One of the original features of the AKP rule as per its bourgeois predecessors within this context proves to be its success in establishing a union organization committed to the state, the party and capital (when we consider the unions that have a different legal status and organize civil servants, although it is not a part of the study, specifically Memur-Sen and the rapid increase in this confederation's number of members).

Other data supporting the above-mentioned corporatist inclination should also be consulted. There is substantial quantitative increase in the number of union members but this does not point to actual unionization, exercise of union rights (like collective labor agreements, strikes) and utilizing union protection. All assessments disregarding the background underlying this apparent increase would be faulty and misleading. Let us investigate this background now.

The weakening of union rights

The quantitative increase in the number of union members does not point out to the exercise of union rights because the AKP rule's most pressing policy to prevent the exercise of union rights is to delay and ban strikes. One can see such hostility towards the working class in Erdoğan's addresses defending strike delays. He stated the following in his address at a meeting held by the International Investors Association on 12 July 2017:

We have been maintaining the state of emergency to let our business world work better. I ask you; do you have any problems, any disruptions in your business world? When we took office there was the state of emergency. But all factories were threatened by strikes. Remember those days. Do you have anything like it today? Quite the contrary. Now we readily intervene into a place threatened by strike, utilizing the state of emergency. We thus say no, we do not permit you to go on a strike because you cannot unsettle our business world.⁶

Erdoğan had openly stated on 7 June 2017, about a month before such statements, at the 24th General Assembly of MÜSİAD that he had had no tolerance for strikes and strikes had been delayed to the benefit of the capital by saying “He would now and then get up and want strike at once, whatever... No offense dude but...”

Erdoğan has actually kept his promise to the capitalist class by using sometimes the state of emergency. A total of 16 strikes have been delayed, with 7 of them during the state of emergency, since the day AKP came into power. The state of emergency, which was claimed to have been declared against the putschists, has become a practice that has terminated the right to work and strike within this framework. The number of workers affected by such de facto ban on strikes is about 193 thousand. The scope of strike delays was, at the same time, extended in 2016 with an opportunity to ban strikes that were regarded to be disruptive of “economic and financial stability” and “inner-city public transportation services” in addition to the grounds of “national security and public health.”⁷

Table 1. Strikes Banned during the AKP Rule

Year	Workplace	Grounds	Trade Union
2003	Petlas	National Security	Petrol-İş
2003	Şişecam	National Security	Kristal-İş
2004	Şişecam	Public Health and National Security	Kristal-İş
2004	Pirelli	National Security	Lastik-İş
2005	Erdemir	National Security	T. Maden-İş
2014	Şişecam	National Security	Kristal-İş
2014	Çayırhan Kömür	Public Health and National Security	T. Maden-İş

2015	MESS Grup	National Security	Birleşik Metal
2017 (SoE)	Asil Çelik	National Security	Birleşik Metal
2017 (SoE)	EMİS Grup	National Security	Birleşik Metal
2017 (SoE)	Akbank	Economic and Financial Stability	Banksis
2017 (SoE)	Şişecam	National Security	Kristal-İş
2017 (SoE)	Mefarİlaç	Public Health	Petrol-İş
2018 (SoE)	MESS Grup	National Security	Türk Metal, Birleşik Metal, Çelik-İş
2018 (SoE)	Soda Kromsan	National Security	Petrol-İş
2019	İzban	Disruptive of Public Transportation Services	Demiryol-İş

Source: DISK-AR, Research on Unionization, 2019.

It would not be wrong to argue that strike bans also affected the tendency to strike. The tendency to strike is calculated by strike incidence which refers to the number of work days at strike per thousand workers.⁸ Strike incidence and the related tendency to strike have sustained a significant decrease during the AKP rule. Strike incidence which was 75 in 1985 went up to 1059 in 1991. Although the figure went as high as 1097 in 1995 through the increase in public strikes, the numbers significantly dropped in the 2000s. Strike incidence, which was 334 during the 1985-2002 period, went down to 25 during the AKP rule (2003-2017), while the mean figure for 2010-2017 went as low as 11 per annum.⁹

Another obstacle before the exercise of union rights is the restrictions imposed on the right to collective bargaining. In other words, although the number of union members increase quantitatively, union member workers' right to collective bargaining has gradually been restricted. Indeed, in spite of the fact that 1 million 859 thousand workers are union members according to the data provided by the ministry in January 2019, 727 thousands of these workers are not eligible for collective labor agreements. This means 39% of unionized workers cannot enjoy the right to collective labor agreements.¹⁰

Moreover, unionization got even more challenging within the private sector with a major development in employers' skills to prevent unionization. One of the leading reasons for the emaciation seen in unionization is the fact that employers got rather specialized in de-unionization techniques through the support of the political power. Some of these techniques have been listed as follows in a related report drafted by Türk-İş:¹¹

- Resorting to ideological discourse slandering trade unions and unionization to keep workers away from unions.
- Psychological coercion on workers by arguing that unionization means

being disloyal to the employer by using traditional relationships like kinship and being denizens of the same city.

- Suppressing workers' "employment security" threatening them with layoffs or closing down the workplace in case of unionization.

- Playing both ends against the middle and preventing collective action by the workers through setting them against one another by provoking differences in political views, faiths, ethnic backgrounds and the like among workers.

- Offering non-wage financial aid and payment to workers in order to make them back down on unionization.

- Laying off workers leading unionization efforts.

- Whole or partial laying off of unionized workers.

- Revoking the authority of the union by recruiting new workers following the lay off of unionized workers.

- Relocating unionized workers, assigning harder tasks to them, forcing them to undertake works outside their professional capacity and competence to intimidate them.

- Dissolving union organizations by subcontracting.

- Preventing workers' freedom to choose their own unions by making workers members of unions established by the employers themselves.

- Preventing workers' freedom to choose their own unions by transferring workers to controlled unions that act in concordance with employers from the unions they were members of.

- Breaking workers' resistance during the unionization process by means of the police and gendarmerie or by hiring people.

- Attempting to keep women workers away from unions through such discourse as "women have nothing to do with unions" by using current gender inequality.

- Employers' acting together particularly in organized industrial zones, industrial estates and free zones and their developing "blacklists" covering unionized workers or those inclined to get unionized preventing such "blacklisted" workers to find jobs at different businesses in the same vicinity.

- Extending work hours, delay in wage payments, reduction in break times, removal of tea services at breaks, repealing free bus rides to work, not offering lunch at work places going through a unionization process. Making imams [priests] to preach and indoctrinate workers to prevent unionization at mosques frequented by workers.

Privatizations and subcontracted labor

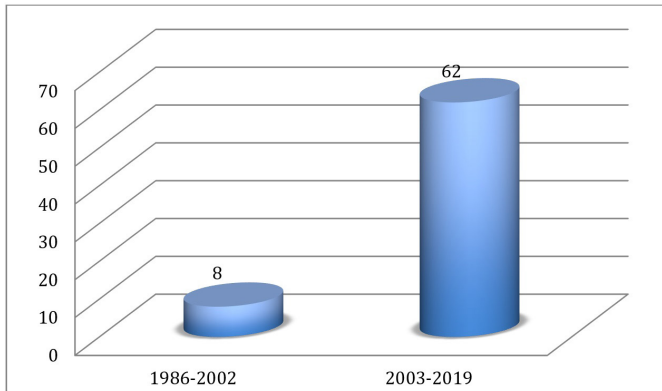
The rush for the privatization of public enterprises and the withdrawal of the state from the economy began in the Özal era and was maintained by subsequent governments in accelerating or decelerating speeds. The liquidation of the public could not be undertaken at the desired speed in the 1990s due to interventions by both the Constitutional Court and other judicial authorities along with objections raised by trade unions. In other words, even the 12 September coup d'état constitution had erected some obstacles before privatization. Nevertheless, one significant difference needs to be underlined. Governments before the AKP legitimized privatization

endeavors by stressing the so-called need to dispose of unprofitable enterprises burdening the state’s resources. AKP governments, on the other hand, based this on disposing of public enterprises as an economic philosophy without having regard to which enterprise was productive or profitable.¹² AKP governments were, thus, the champions of privatization and the liquidation of the public. Both the constitution itself and some legal regulations removed a significant portion of the obstacles before privatization. Privatizations undertaken during the AKP era have accounted for the 88% of all privatizations.¹³ While privatization before the AKP was 8 billion dollars, this figure amounted to 62 billion dollars during the AKP rule.

Graph 3. Privatization in Turkey, 1986-2019 (Billion Dollars)

Source: DİSK-AR, Labor during the AKP era, 2018.

Another point that calls for attention about privatization is the fact that the privatization of public services has also gained impetus during the AKP era. In other words, not only has public production but also these fields, prominently health and education, have been rendered capital appreciation. For instance, the number of private schools which was 1780 during the 2001-2002 education year has skyrocketed to 12,809 in 2018-2019.¹⁴ Thus, on the one hand, the number of private education and private medical institutions have been rapidly increasing, on



the other hand, public institutions have become commercialized, and services that should have been offered essentially by public personnel began to be undertaken through service procurement and the subcontractor system.

Subcontracting has begun to occupy a larger space in Turkey’s agenda notably since the 2000s. This practice had already been common in the construction sector. Further the predominant mode of work in the construction sector was employing subcontractors. Indeed, when one looks into the number of subcontractor workers

12 Dilek Filizfidanoğlu, “2008 Özelleştirme yılı”, *Cumhuriyet Strateji*, 1 January 2008.

13 DİSK-AR, AKP Döneminde Emek [Labor during the AKP era], 2018.

14 <http://sgb.meb.gov.tr/www/resmi-istatistikler/icerik/64>.

in the private sector, it is possible to see the primacy is the construction sector.

Subcontracting has systematically increased in the public sector, primarily in healthcare, education, mining and energy sectors, especially since 2002. While the number of registered subcontracted workers was 387 thousand in 2002, this figure went up to 1 million 611 thousand in 2011. Subcontracting began to be preferred more in both the private and public sectors as it is a mode of work resorted to by employers to avoid legal obligations. Moreover, while each capitalist raised the rate of surplus value by making labor work for low wages through employing subcontractor workers, the public sector has been avoiding levying new taxes and increasing its share from distribution by disposing of public personnel spending by employing subcontractor workers instead of secured employment.¹⁵ It would not be inaccurate to argue that this state of affairs was a reflection of political inclinations aiming to develop a flexible and precarious work life in the field of employment.¹⁶

Flexibility and precarity

The AKP rule represents an era during which the ideology and legal structure of precarious and flexible work have been rendered institutionalized. The Labor Act of 2003 which was enacted during AKP's early years had already put forth provisions based on flexibility. This was followed in 2016 by significant regulatory measures to enable flexibility in the labor market as well. Law No. 6717, which went into force in 2016, facilitated remote working forms including teleworking and homeworking that were among the modes of flexible working. The same regulation granted the power to establish employment relationships to private employment agencies as well. Thus, what was targeted was nothing else but more precarity for the employee, less financial burden on the employer, streamlining layoffs and handing a large unemployment pool to private employment agencies for their brokerage endeavors.

The National Employment Strategy (NES) issued during the AKP era proves to be an open source in terms of its revealing the foundations of flexible and precarious labor. The 8th paragraph of the 2017-19 Action Plan issued in concordance with the NES has set forth ensuring security and flexibility in the labor market as one of the main policy axes (p. 2).

The same action plan has provided the necessity for flexible working as follows:

Globalization and rapidly developing technological change cause fundamental changes along with far-reaching reconstruction in world economy. This change affects working relations and labor markets deeply and transforms them. Economic crises and competitive environment happening especially in the last 20 years have caused the abandoning of strict regulations in working life; countries, companies

15 Onur Ender Aslan, *Kamu personel rejimi*, Ankara: TODAİE Publications, 2005, p. 412.

16 Serkan Öngel, "Türkiye'de taşeronlaşmanın boyutları", *DİSK-AR Bulletin*, Winter 2014.

and labor force had to give up classical production and working styles in order to adapt to change and crises. All these developments have provided a basis for the adoption of flexible production and flexible working in terms of both businesses and employees (para. 66, p. 29).

This, hereby, is the ideology of precarious and flexible working: the stress on the adoption of flexible working not only by employers but also by the work force. Thus both AKP’s and employers’ justification for flexibility proves to be the same. The so-called need for flexible work has been explained by such grounds as “change in information technologies,” “increasing global competition,” “adaptation to changing economic circumstances,” and “increasing the competitive power of enterprises.” Flexibilization of labor markets, in this sense, has become a priority policy during the AKP rule precisely for the survival of capital.

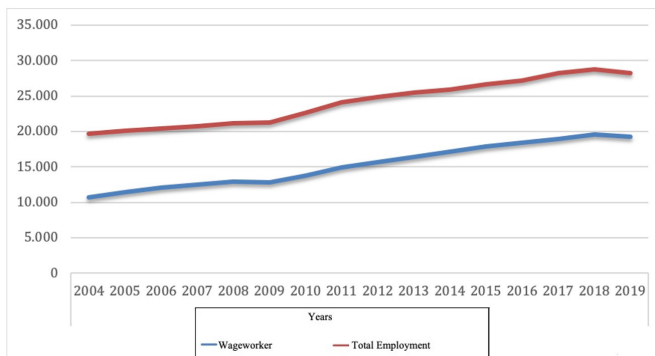
Proletarianization and unemployment

It has been stated that proletarianization has been on the rise both in Turkey and the world with the majority of the population made up of those making a living by selling their labor. The following graph explicitly demonstrates this state of affairs.

Graph 4. Total Employment and Wageworker Rates in Turkey (2014-2019)

Total employment was around 20 million in 2004 in which the rate of wage and casual workers was about half this figure. Total employment has drawn near to 30 million in 2019 with the rate of wage and casual workers increasing to about 20 million. Therefore, while half the society made a living by selling their labor power at the beginning of the 2000s, wage earners now account for two thirds of the total employment in 2020. This is quite a radical change which stands for a grand wave of proletarianization possibly bringing about both social and political consequences.

The post-2002 era has proven to be one during which proletarianization increased while unemployment invariably multiplied with regards to the whole economy. The following graph presents annual unemployment rates.

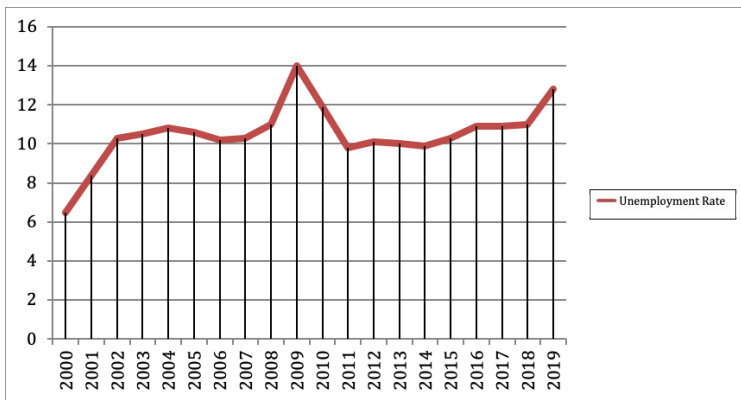


Source: Compiled from the Labor Force Statistics by TSI.

Graph 5. Unemployment Rate in Turkey (2000-2019)

Source: Compiled from the Labor Force Statistics by TSI.

In brief, unemployment rates after 2012 significantly increased. Even though one puts the economic crisis related rapidly increasing unemployment rate of 2009 aside, it is observed that the course of unemployment maintained a level at and over 10% until 2019. This situation unavoidably expanded the reserve army of labor and brought about a competitive pressure on wages. Thus labor income dropped off in the real sense. Should the year 1999 is taken to be 100, real wages per capita remained at the same level in 2011 as well.¹⁷ Therefore, while proletarianization increased, so did unemployment and real wages of the labor force drop accordingly. Significant hikes have been observed in unemployment rates in Turkey during the



period when the problems of the accumulation model led by loans started to become more prominent. The highest unemployment rates in Turkey since the end of 1990s, according to official figures, were recorded in the first quarters of 2009 and 2019 respectively. Although one can barely compare these figures due to changes

Table 2. Labor Force Statistics and Widely Defined Unemployment Rates (2018-19) (Thousand persons)

Years	Labor force	Unemployed	Unemployment rate (%)	Those with no hope of employment	Other (not a jobseeker but ready to work)	Seasonal workers	Time dependent underemployment	The number of widely-defined unemployed	Widely-defined unemployment rate (%)	The widest definition: the unemployed including the underemployed
2018-10	32658	3788	11.60	485	1579	116	383	6351	18.23	7101
2018-11	32295	3981	12.33	522	1614	123	406	6646	19.23	7442
2018-12	31957	4302	13.46	598	1710	142	401	7153	20.79	7920
2019-1	31825	4668	14.67	618	1693	163	410	7552	22.02	8344
2019-2	32084	4730	14.74	621	1754	142	422	7669	22.16	8475
2019-3	32339	4544	14.05	563	1706	117	426	7356	21.18	8181
2019-4	32401	4202	12.97	553	1732	102	374	6963	20.02	7755
2019-5	32426	4157	12.82	558	1736	105	334	6890	19.78	7622
2019-6	32766	4253	12.98	583	1726	103	323	6988	19.86	7724
2019-7	33113	4596	13.88	614	1740	94	320	7364	20.71	8112
2019-8	33180	4650	14.02	613	1635	74	333	7305	20.58	8084
2019-9	33006	4566	13.83	630	1616	65	322	7199	20.38	7983
2019-10	32740	4396	13.43	668	1507	80	350	7001	20.01	7750

Source: Labor Force Statistics by the TSI and author's own calculations.

¹⁷ Serkan Öngel and Kurtar Tanyılmaz, "Türkiye ekonomisinde küresel kriz karşısında sermayenin tepkisi: İşçilerin artan sömürüsü", *DİSK-AR*, Fall 2013, p. 39.

introduced to the calculation of labor force statistics, it can at the same time be argued that these rates correspond to the highest unemployment rates in the history of the Republic of Turkey. The impeditive consequence of such rates has been the fact that impoverishment remained constant, if not higher.

An assessment of the condition of labor in Turkey within the last two decades confirms a similar trend in those of other countries where neoliberal policies are implemented. Briefly expressed, this trend shows a setback in the material position of labor. Increases in labor productivity are not in any way reflected on wages, and labor's share in income either makes no headway or falls back. Indeed, no increases were seen in labor's share from gross domestic product in spite of fluctuations within the period during the last two decades that can be described as a rapid process of change in Turkish economy. The increase in employment during the 2010s has been quite lower than the mean annual increase of labor force. It is also observed that services have rapidly increased in the sectorial distribution of employment. Further, rapid employment increases have been seen in the construction sector until the 2018-19 crisis. An overall assessment shows that while proletarianization increased, unemployment also got into an upward trend after 2010 according to labor force statistics and employment data in Turkey. Wages of laborers in the labor force have made no headway in real terms and have rapidly been dropping under crisis circumstances. The consequence is the intensification of cases of injustice in income distribution and the deepening of poverty.

As has been presented in the table 2, the number of the unemployed within its widest definition including the underemployed is about 8 million.

The overcrowding in the army of the unemployed, also known as the reserve army of labor, extends great opportunities to employers for the deterioration of working conditions. Additionally, the conditions of millions of workers suffering from precarious practices indirectly affect working conditions as has also been the case in Turkey. Should one look at the picture taking into account those who are not considered to be unemployed under official definitions, whose relationship with the labor market is more fragile than current workers, a surplus population getting more crowded than the labor force can be identified. When the conditions of accumulation are met excluding those who are not assumed to readily return to the labor market and taking into account those who are predicted to start working again (the unemployed excluding those who are unemployed for more than 2 years, those ready to work, seasonal workers and the time-dependent underemployed), one can argue that the number of persons within fluid surplus population would be more than 6 million. The increase in fluid surplus population, the proportion of which to the total labor force in Turkey amounts to 19%, conduces to the further irregularization of working conditions, to the easier imposition on the working class of poorer working and living conditions. It thus serves various functions for the reproduction of capital under crisis conditions.¹⁸

¹⁸ “Its production is included in that of the relative surplus population, its necessity in theirs; along with the surplus population, pauperism forms a condition of capitalist production, and of the capitalist development of wealth.” Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of*

At this point one would ask why workers and laborers still vote for AKP. The following is a brief discussion of why.

Why do workers vote for AKP?

One point needs to be underlined first. It would be wrong to assume that workers and laborers were completely silent against the unfair and unlawful practices they faced in their workplaces. Indeed, workers staged 1,116 protests in 2015 with a sharp decline to 608¹⁹ in 2016, 607 in 2017 and 642 in 2018.²⁰ Most of these protests were staged at workplaces against problems like layoffs, trade union membership, and non-payment of wages.

However, as has been demonstrated in the previous sections, while it is clear that the state's interventions into the labor market during the AKP era are characterized by neo-liberal and anti-labor policies to a great extent, the reasons why workers and the poor, who have been adversely affected by such policies, continue to support and vote for the same government should firstly be explained. Involvement in a protest at the workplace against the employer does not mean that the worker will directly develop political consciousness. Nevertheless, it is not possible to explain the reasons why workers and laborers still vote for the government in spite of all its negative policies against themselves merely by the absence of political consciousness.

It was previously mentioned that AKP had two original features and the focus was particularly set on the second point (increase in proletarianization and establishment of pro-AKP workers organizations). Now the third point that supports the second one and distinguishes AKP from previous bourgeois parties can be addressed. This third originality lies in AKP's success in receiving the political support of both the poor and low-wage workers and laborers through its "social policy" practices.²¹

States' social policies and the related factors cannot be regarded as something

Political Economy, Vol. 1, İstanbul: Yordam Kitap, (2011 [1867]), p. 622.

19 The most important reason for this decline is probably the fact that the country was driven into a climate of conflict and authoritarianism following the elections held in the summer of 2015. The resolution process was shelved after the election and armed conflict broke out in the South East. ISIS attacks against mass protests resulting in Suruç and Ankara massacres were also committed during this period. When one at the same time takes into account the state of emergency regime initiated after the failed coup attempt of July 2016, the reasons of the subsequent declines can be understood more clearly.

20 Data compiled from the reports drafted by Labor Studies Group (*Emek Çalışmaları Topluluğu*). See <https://emekcalisma.org/category/raporlar/>

21 There are many other social, economic, political and cultural reasons (cultural identity policies, conservatism, nationalism, consciousness level of the working class, etc.) as to why AKP was able to obtain the support of the proletariat. Yet the focus of this study is on the original features of AKP that render it different from other bourgeois parties. One of its original features is the issue of social policy and social assistance that make workers and laborers vote for AKP.

completely different from the capitalist accumulation regime. The neo-liberal accumulation regime introduced step by step beginning in the 1980s has also designated the conception of social policy. To take the issue from an earlier time, AKP’s originality regarding this matter lies in its successful transformation of social policy practices, which in fact is a civil right, into a process of poverty management instead of reducing or fighting poverty with its conception of volunteering and philanthropy that it inherited from the Ottomans. Poverty is, thus, transformed into a political relationship by means of social assistance that is also cloaked in a religious content and commodified in concordance with neo-liberal economic policies. This is killing two birds with one stone: both social assistance has become a valorisation area for certain capital circles through its commodification demonstrating compatibility with the neo-liberal accumulation regime and AKP succeeded in garnering the support of the disorganized and informal parts of the working class and the rural poor. The following further explicates this argument.

AKP’s social policy boils down to the implementation of social assistance by means of local governments, NGOs and notably via foundations directly established by the state.²² Social assistance can be classified within this framework as public central social assistance,²³ public local social assistance,²⁴ private sector social assistance²⁵ and civilian social assistance.²⁶

The first two above-mentioned categories covering public social assistance account for the largest share in social assistance. The aim of Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundations has been set forth in the related law as “...to enable fair income distribution, to encourage social cooperation and solidarity by taking measures reinforcing social justice.”²⁷

Social assistance can either be direct monetary aid or aid in kind. Such in-kind aid includes programs like food, fuel, housing, educational material, and medical support. It would not, however, be accurate to argue that neither public central nor public local social assistance were able to meet their stated goals to enable a fair income distribution and to reduce poverty. Indeed, the following table presents data

22 Onur Metin, “Sosyal politika açısından AKP dönemi: sosyal yardım alanında yaşananlar”, *Çalışma ve Toplum*, No. 1, 2011, pp. 194-195.

23 These are Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundations established in cities and districts by the General Directorate of Social Assistance operating under the Ministry of Family and Social Policy. Today there is a total of 1003 foundations established by the state (see, shorturl.at/oNU23). Public central social assistance occupies the largest space among social assistance categories in Turkey. The financial resources of such aid are available by public funding.

24 Social assistance offered by local governments (municipalities and special provincial administrations) again through using public resources.

25 Assistance especially by corporations to their own employees within the framework of collective labor agreements or volunteering.

26 Assistance by NGOs, religious communities and religious foundations.

27 Office of the Prime Minister Circular Letter No. 1986/11.

that confirms this shortcoming.

Table 3. Relative Poverty Rates and Income Distribution Inequality by Years

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Relative Poverty Rates (%)*	23.8	21.2	22.7	22.4	21.8	21.9	21.2	20.1	21.2
Income Distribution (Gini coefficient)	0.402	0.404	0.402	0.400	0.391	0.397	0.404	0.405	0.408

* 60% of the median value of equivalent household disposable income is taken as the poverty line.

Source: Compiled from TSI studies on Income and Living Conditions.

As is revealed by the table, more than one fifth of the population has been living on the poverty line. Thus, it is seen that such aids' poverty reducing impact has been quite limited, even little if any. Additionally, inequality kept on increasing peaking in 2018 although some decrease was seen in 2014 and 2015 in income distribution inequality. Therefore, one can argue that social assistance neither contributed to the fight against poverty nor to justice in income distribution.

The direct correlation of social assistance to capital accumulation can be understood within the framework of the above-listed commodification of aid programs. Thereby social assistance could be articulated with neo-liberal economic policies. Looking particularly at aids in the education and healthcare fields would suffice for examples of the case in question. For instance, merely 27.6% of the textbooks distributed to students during the 2019-2020 education year were published by the Ministry of National Education while 72.4% by private companies within the scope of free book aids offered by the state in the field of education.²⁸ Another significant datum on education is related to the promotion of private schools. The state started to pay a certain amount of tuition to private schools in 2015 by initiating financial aid to families who wanted to send their children to private schools. This state of affairs has led to an increase both in the number of private schools and in the number of students attending such schools. Indeed, while the share of private schools within the total number of schools was 12.6% in 2014-2015, this figure went up to 19.2% in 2018-2019. While the increase in the number of students in state schools was 0.9% between 2014 and 2019, the one in private schools between the same years was 74.9%.²⁹ Within this framework

²⁸ <http://www.eba.gov.tr/>

²⁹ Statistics by the Ministry of National Education, 2018-2019 (See shorturl.at/ckyEO).

social assistance functions as a tool, *inter alia*, to increase capital accumulation, to open up new spheres of valorization for capital, appraisal fields for capital and to enable the commodification of the service offered by means of transferring public resources to private capital. The two visible points in social assistance policy within the scope laid out above refer, on the one hand, to the transformation of aid into a form available for appraisal by the capital through the commodification of aid and, on the other hand, to cloak poverty with a manageable form. This means that social assistance has thoroughly been established as a capitalist category within the labor-capital relationship.³⁰ To these it should be added that social assistance, as a form of non-wage income and means of livelihood, positively contributes to the conditions under which households give into poverty and low-wages, while the sense of loss brought about by the customer relations formed between the provider and receiver of aid is transformed into political support and the freedom granted to workers to keep them distant from strikes and other forms of struggle.³¹ Thus, while charity is organized at the level of the state on the one hand, charity-based relations are subjected to overt political ends on the other.³²

The gap created by social policy’s loss of “its old meaning” as a public-centered organizational instrument was prescribed to be filled in by the private sector, particularly by NGOs (associations, foundations, trade unions, “faith-based charity organizations” etc.). While the interventionist role of the public has been diminished during this process, it is seen that foundations, associations, volunteer organizations and philanthropists have become prominent in such fields of social policy as education, health and social assistance.³³ In other words, the new non-state actors of social policy were these types of bodies.

Although the regulatory principle in social assistance policies is not religion itself, it should be noted that religion too has an impact in terms of the ideology which shapes implementation. Thus, social assistance has been presented with an Islamic motive within the framework of “to serve” conception, while this in turn has matched up with the expanding new-right and new conservative practices as a global trend. The address by the then vice prime minister, Bülent Arınç, receiving the annual “father of the poor” award presented by YOYAV, which is a “faith-based” civil society organization, provides a very good example regarding this matter:

Turkey stands on the feet of these. This is why the society does not have social explosions. This is why conflict and disorder cannot find themselves a necessary base in the society. Because if you do not help the poor, people become others’ wolves. Then homo homini lupus becomes real, this is what we were taught in the

30 For a comprehensive analysis of this mode of capitalist category see Denizcan Kutlu, *Türkiye’de sosyal yardım rejiminin oluşumu*, Ankara, Nota Bene, 2015.

31 Kutlu, *ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

32 Zafer Yılmaz, “AKP ve Devlet Hayırseverliği: Minnet Ekonomisi, Borç Toplumu ve Siyasal Sermaye Birikimi”, *Toplum ve Bilim*, No. 128, 2014, p.56.

33 Kutlu, *ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

past. (...) This joining of hands, this unity strengthens Turkey. Turkey does not have social explosions, not anybody takes a gun in their hands and hold it against somebody's head. Not anybody probably gives somebody else's property the evil eye. Not anybody regards one another's life with hostility and hate. The reason for this are the sentiments of charity and benevolence. (...) Why do I use religious references more? These are what our religion, our faith dictates us. If people of faith comply with these, they believe that they will win Allah's consent but if the price of these in social life, in secular life, in worldly life is not a religious gain people would feel free to do these or not. It goes without saying that everyone would agree to help the poor out of humanitarian, moral sentiments but they would do this more from the heart if unworldly satisfaction and interest are in question.³⁴

Faith-based aid associations and foundations have thusly been founded during this process with an ever-growing number. While these aid associations surely attempted to popularize and improve the conception of Islamic charity, they also reproduced the neo-liberal perception of poverty. So much so that an astounding ideological bombardment was carried out simultaneously by means of the mainstream media on issues like EU membership, democratization, reduction of state intervention etc. and this situation, unfortunately, amounted to the working class and laborers extending support to the AKP rule and in some cases even made workers' organizations supportive of privatization.

In lieu of conclusion

This study analyzed the situation of labor and the working class in a couple of its dimensions during the AKP era. Material data were used to deliver an analysis of what happened during the AKP rule with regards to many issues of interest to workers spanning from the minimum wage to distribution of income, from unionization to collective bargaining and the right to strike, from employment and unemployment to subcontracted working and the losses sustained by labor were exposed.

The study also provided an answer as to why workers and laborers supported the AKP in spite of all these anti-labor policies. In this concluding part a few points on the policies of the left and socialists need to be noted.

While virtually all the left has been talking about the crisis of trade unions and their impasse, no one mentions their own predicament. In other words, what has been happening is the crisis of socialists rather than a union and a great majority of the socialists are still oblivious to this fact.

Namely, socialists have extremely been affected by the expanding left-wing liberalism and identity politics cross-sectioning classes since the 1980s. Some argued that now identity and cultural issues were more prominent than that of the class (like Alain Touraine) and some, going even further, propounded that class too was an identity (like those in the group calling themselves autonomous Marxists).

34 <http://www.haber7.com/siyaset/haber/558069-arinc-yilin-yoksul-babasi-odulunc-layik-goruldu>.

Therefore, the policies of many socialist organizations were formed around left-wing liberalism and identity problems rather than on the basis of class struggles. Thus fetishism of civil society even the socialists from class conception by eliminating the classes bringing about a non-class consciousness and a world of ideology in them.³⁵

The most significant point to be made on this issue, therefore, is nothing but the return of socialists to class politics. Should such a return occur, the consent handed to the AKP by the workers and laborers might be reversed and it might indeed mobilize them.

35 Sungur Savran, “Arap Devriminin Dirilişi: Türkiye İçin Dersler”, *Devrimci Marksizm*, No.39-40, 2019, pp. 13-62.