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# **The Wave of Strikes and Resistances of the Metal Workers of 2015 in Turkey**

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## **Abstract**

In May and June 2015, an intense wave of “wildcat” strikes and protests has happened in Turkish automotive industry with the participation of some ten thousands workers. These strikes and protests have affected leading companies in the automotive industry such as Renault, Tofaş (Fiat) and Ford factories and their suppliers are unique industrial movements in the history of Turkish Industrial relations. The wave of strikes and resistance was initiated due to low wages. However, these strikes and resistance movements were not only against the employers but also against Türk Metal (Turkish Metal Union) that was organised in these workplaces. The reaction to the union was another rooted reason of these protests. As a result of the protests, Türk Metal has lost a considerable number of members. Workers achieved partial gains. These protests as a challenge to Koç –one of the biggest business groups of Turkey–, the Turkish Employers’ Association of Metal Industries (MESS) –the biggest employer association– and the Turkish Metal and Allied Workers Union (Türk Metal Union) –biggest and imperious trade union–, give significant clues with regard to the crisis of Turkish industrial relations. This resistance wave can also be read as the failure of the mainstream trade union approach in Turkey.

Key words: Turkish metal industry, Trade unions in Turkey, Türk Metal, Birleşik Metal, MESS, Strike

## **Introduction**

The extensive resistance movements and strikes that were exceptional protests in metal/automotive industry within the history of Turkish labour relations, started in May 2015

and its impacts continued in June and July 2015. It is possible to say that ten thousands of metal workers (the exact number can not be determined though) were involved in this wave of resistances and strikes that took place in the biggest automotive companies of Turkey. These protests and resistance movements might be assessed in the category of uncontrolled or “wildcat” strikes in the literature of industrial relations since they were sudden, unexpected and out of the procedure laid down by the current labour legislation. Moreover they were organised beyond the control and initiative of the Turkish Metal and Allied Workers Union (Türk Metal Union). This kind of strikes which are out of guidance and surveillance of the trade unions including work stoppages, workplace occupations, and slowdown strikes are performed on by workers’ own initiative. The most important characteristic of the uncontrolled and wildcat strikes is that they are spontaneous protests, which deactivate formal mechanisms of industrial relations. It is extremely difficult to find ‘wildcat’ and ‘non-union’ strikes on this scale and intensity in the history of Turkish labour relations. The resistances and strikes of 2015 in the metal industry might be distinguished as a challenge to the trade union status quo and the mainstream trade unionism in Turkey.

In the first half of 2015, a sort of storm of workers’ protests emerged in the metal industry in Turkey. At the end of January, the United Metal Workers Union (Birleşik Metal-İş) started strikes with the participation of almost 15 thousands of metal workers from 22 work places. However, the government on grounds of the national security prohibited these strikes. Later in May 2015, Renault, Tofaş (Fiat) and Ford workers started the resistance. The protest also spread to other factories of Koç, the leading business group of Turkey. Metal workers started the resistance not only against their employers but also against Türk Metal Union of which they were members. These resistance movements had lasted for several days, in fact for several weeks. These protests, as challenge to both the Turkish Employers’ Association of Metal Industries (MESS) –the most powerful employer’s organisation in Turkey– and Türk Metal Union–the biggest and imperious trade union–have had significant impact on the history of Turkish labour relations. This wave of resistance can also be read as the failure of the mainstream trade unionism in Turkey. The fundamental characteristics of the mainstream unionism can be summarised as a leader-oriented excessive centralisation, an inefficient structure possessing weak relationships with workers, and the lacking of transparency and union democracy.

How did this unique and massive wave of strikes and resistance movements emerge? One should review characteristics of the labour relations in the metal industry and their historical background, in brief, the fundamental characteristics of the industrial relations in Turkey to grasp the metal protests and strikes of 2015.

### **Fundamental Characteristics of the Industrial Relations in Turkey**

It is possible to summarise the fundamental characteristics of unionism in Turkey as in the following way: First, it is necessary to underline the low union density and the limited coverage of collective bargaining agreements (CBAs). In the late 1980s and early 1990s the union density level was around 20-25 percent but it dropped dramatically for the last 25 years.<sup>1</sup> According to the official data, the union density estimates 11 percent (2015) in Turkey, yet de facto situation is worse. The ratio of workers in the coverage of CBAs is around 7-8 percent. Among around 14 million of workers, one million workers involve in the coverage of CBAs whereas the union density of workers who work in the private industry is 3-4 percent, which is considerably low.<sup>2</sup> Second, we see the over-centralisation and oligarchic tendencies based on the industry-level unionism. The third characteristic is the existence of a fragmented structure based on the union rivalry. Some 25 percent of workers, who are union members, are left out of the coverage of the collective bargaining because of the lack of an effective extension mechanism as well as the complexity of the CBAs competency system. The Turkish CBAs competency mechanism, which is open to time-consuming and political-administrative interventions, is one of the main reasons of the union busting.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, because of employers' systematic union-busting practices and the lack of an effective job security system, unionised workers are being made redundant and are prevented to be unionised. In Turkey, employers' practices aimed at union-busting are far and wide. Dismissal of unionised workers, the use of force against unionised workers, discrimination between unionised and non-unionised workers, aggravation of working conditions of unionised workers and blacklisting of workers are all included to this spectrum.<sup>4</sup> During the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) ruling tenure, the unionisation process has dissolved significantly and thereby, Turkey has become the country with the lowest union density among the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development countries (OECD).<sup>5</sup>

In Turkey, there is a highly centralised and oligarchical trade union structure, based on the industry level unionism. Trade unions can only be established at industry level. According to the law and regulations, it is not possible to establish workplace/company unions, craft unions, federations or regional unions. The competency of unions' local units (branches and shop stewards) is extremely restricted. There are serious obstructions on the way to the implementation of democracy in trade unions. This centralised and oligarchical unionism was solidified with the 10 percent sectoral threshold that was applied between 1983 and 2012. Trade unions that could not pass this threshold were not entitled to be part of collective bargaining agreements. Consequently, 10 percent sector threshold prevented new and independent unions from entering to the CBAs' system in Turkey where union-density is already quite low. All those factors consolidated oligarchic tendencies in the trade unions, obstructed the reflection of the problems from local and sector level to the central level and finally caused the emergence of "trade union casts."

Although unionism is centralised in Turkey, it presents a fragmented structure in itself.<sup>6</sup> Workers have been organised for many years in three main trade union confederations: The Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (Türk-İş), The Confederation of Turkish Real Trade Unions (Hak-İş) and the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey (DİSK). Independent trade unions are ineffective. Türk-İş (1952), the biggest confederation of all, has a moderate and non-partisan policy. Türk-İş has been influenced to a large extent by the US unionism. Thus it possesses an understanding of trade union called as *butter and bread unionism*. Türk-İş, as it has been organised predominantly in the public run enterprises, it has had strong relationships with governments for many years. Thus right-wing governments have supported Türk-İş as opposed to a more radical unionism.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, DİSK emerged as a reaction to this approach of Türk-İş in 1967. DİSK that was organised in the private sector defended a democratic class unionism. Unlike Türk-İş, which remains close to the centre-right political parties and the US-inspired unionism; DİSK has remained close to the leftist and socialist politics and to the continental European unionism. There was an intense rivalry and struggle between Türk-İş and DİSK before the coup d'état of 12 September 1980. The metal industry has a specific "battlefield" in this struggle. Along with the military coup d'état of 12 September 1980, the activities of DİSK ceased between 1980 and 1992. Throughout this period, workers, particularly the ones in the metal industry, who were members of DİSK, were forced to become members of Türk-İş.

The third confederation Hak-İş was established by, a cadre with Islamic adherence in 1976. Hak-İş started to gain power in the 1990s. Later on as a result of its close ties with the ruling party AKP, it extended considerably especially in the 2000s. This tendency has continued till now. Although the ratio of representation of Türk-İş in the total unionised workers declines, the same ratio significantly increases for Hak-İş. Whilst the representation ratio of Türk-İş has decreased from 69 percent (2013) to 59 percent (2015), the representation ratio of Hak-İş has increased from 16 percent to 27 percent during the same period. It is possible to mention an intense union rivalry and tension between three confederations. One of the areas where this rivalry is intensely experienced is the metal industry.

### **Labour Relations in the Metal Industry**

Metal industry is one of the leading industries known as locomotive and trend settler in terms of labour relations. By the year of 2015, in this sector where 1.5 million workers work, 12 percent of all workers are being employed. The automotive sub sector has overwhelming share in the metal industry. Renault (belongs to the Turkish Armed Forces Assistance (and Pension) Fund, *Ordu Yardımlaşma Kurumu*, OYAK), Ford (belongs to Koç Group), Tofaş (belongs to Koç and Fiat), Türk Traktör (belongs to Koç), Hyundai and Toyota companies are some of the companies that have significant share in the production in Turkey. Koç Group has a distinctive significance in the automotive industry. The union density in this sector, which is 16 percent, ranks above the average union density in Turkey. According to the statistics of July 2015, there are approximately 230 thousands of unionised workers in metal industry. However, the number of workers within the coverage of the collective bargaining agreements is much lower. By the end of 2014, there have been around 150-160 thousands of workers within the coverage of collective bargaining agreements.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, almost 30 percent of the unionised members in this sector are out of the coverage of the collective bargaining agreements. Although the unionisation rate is relatively high and the leading companies are under the coverage of collective agreements, the wages of the workers are lower than the wages in numerous sectors. It is possible to talk about a pseudo-trade union structure, which is represented by Türk Metal in the sector. The union

density is relatively high in quantitative terms; nonetheless an ineffective unionism predominates over the sector.

Three big trade unions are active in the metal industry in Turkey. These three trade unions are respectively, Türk Metal, which is a member of Türk-İş, Birleşik Metal, a member of DİSK and Çelik-İş, a member of Hak-İş. The biggest trade union in the metal industry is Türk Metal. According to the statistics by July 2015, Türk Metal has 166 thousand, Çelik-İş has 32 thousand and Birleşik Metal has 31 thousand members. However, it is necessary to emphasise that these figures are gross numbers and the number of workers who actually benefit from the collective bargaining agreements (having de facto union membership) is 25-30 percent lower than the above figures. Although there are many independent trade unions in the sector, they do not have significant number of members; their role in industrial relations remains symbolic.

The oldest trade union in the sector is Birleşik Metal (the United Metal Workers Union) whose roots date back to 1947. The union was established in 1947 with the name of Demir-İş and re-named as Maden-İş in the 1950s. Kemal Türkler, the president of Maden-İş and DİSK, pioneered in establishing the Labour Party of Turkey (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*, TİP) in 1961. At the beginning, Maden İş, which used to be the member of Türk-İş had played a leading role in the establishment of DİSK in 1967. Maden-İş played a critical role in the labour relations as a big and effective trade union from 1960 to 1980. Maden-İş led the large scaled strikes and resistance movements in the 1960s and 1970s, and became a prominent symbol of the dynamism occurred in that era. During the 1970s, there were major tensions and conflicts between Maden-İş and Türk Metal, which were trying to be organised in the state-run workplaces in the metal sector. In the catastrophic environment of the end of 1970s, the extreme rightist terrorists assassinated Kemal Türkler, the then president of Maden-İş and DİSK, in July 1980. This political assassination was a menace towards both Maden-İş and DİSK which were the pioneers of democratic and class based unionism. Following 12 September 1980 military coup, together with DİSK and its member trade unions, the activities of Maden-İş were banned, its leaders were arrested and they were judged by death penalty. DİSK and Maden-İş remained closed until 1992. After their activities being stopped, members of Maden-İş were forced to resign and become members of Türk Metal. Some members of Maden-İş became members of an independent union called Otomobil-İş. In 1993, the Maden-İş was re-launched and after it merged with Otomobil-İş, it is named as Birleşik Metal-İş.

Türk Metal Union was established in 1963 with the name of Metal-İş Federation. While Maden-İş was as a active member of Türk-İş, another union's establishment, which is also a member of Türk-İş, sparked a debate in Türk-İş. This new trade union emerged as competitor to Maden-İş which was dissent in Türk-İş. The foundation of Metal-İş triggered the rivalry between the trade unions in the sector, which lasted many years. The president of Metal-İş, Kaya Özdemir was elected as Member of Parliament from the Justice Party (Adalet Partisi, AP), a centre-right party, in the elections of 1965 and was both the member of board and the executive committee of Türk-İş for many years. In 1975, Mustafa Özbek was elected as the president of Türk Metal and he remained in the office for 34 years (until 2009).<sup>9</sup> Following Mustafa Özbek's election as the president, the functioning of Türk Metal took an authoritarian and one-man mentality. In addition the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP) (extreme rightist) gained the influence on the union. While Türk Metal, which had the influential role in the 1970s on public metal enterprises, Maden-İş was the dominant trade union in the private sector. During this era, big rivalries and struggles occurred between these two trade unions.

In the aftermath of the coup d'état of 12 September 1980, the activities of Maden-İş were banned. Therefore Türk-Metal became more and more influential in the sector with the support of MESS and the military junta. In the 1980s, MESS and Türk Metal constituted a new trade union status quo in the metal sector by taking the support of the governments. The most important feature of this new status quo was the construction of a 'tamed' unionism in the metal industry. After 1993, intense tension and struggles restarted between Türk-Metal and Birleşik Metal in the metal industry. As a matter of fact, this tension and struggles can be read as the manifestation of two different ways of unionism.

In the metal industry, collective bargaining agreements are concluded between MESS and the previously mentioned three trade unions. However, these trade unions do not have a common voice during the collective bargaining. The biggest union Türk Metal is reluctant to cooperate with other unions. Therefore, firstly Türk Metal concludes the collective bargaining agreements with MESS, called the Metal Group Collective Bargaining Agreement, and then MESS tries to impose it on other trade unions. Birleşik Metal has been opposing the imposition of the group collective agreement for many years. Thus, lastly in January 2015, Birleşik Metal, after rejecting to sign the same group collective agreement, which was



concluded by Türk Metal and MESS, went on strike. However, the government on the ground of national security purposes a day later suspended (de facto banned) the strike. The "suspension" of any strike under current Turkish labour legislation in practice means an indefinite ban, because the law imposes compulsory arbitration at the end of the 60-day suspension, unless the parties have either come to an agreement or voluntarily sought arbitration. It was obvious that the strike, which came out in a very limited part of the metal industry, was not related to the national security. The strike, with the attempts of MESS and other employers' organisations, was postponed essentially for financial and economic reasons.<sup>10</sup> The postponement of the strike with ostensible reasons meant that workers were left with no choice other than being trapped between MESS and Türk Metal.

Birleşik Metal and Çelik-İş, two trade unions in the sector are members of the international trade union organisations. Both of them are members of IndustriAll Global Union (IndustriAll) and IndustriAll European Trade Union (IndustriAll Europe). However, Türk-Metal is not a member of any international union organisation. The applications of Türk-Metal have not been accepted for several years. Birleşik Metal opposes to the membership of Türk-Metal to the international trade union organisations on the grounds that Türk-Metal is not an independent trade union and its unionism is pro-employer without internal democracy. As a result, international trade union organisations do not accept Türk-Metal's applications for membership. Birleşik Metal argues that the union choices of the workers should be designated by a referendum instead of intense competitions and conflicts among unions. Yet, Türk Metal does not accept any referendum mechanism. Consequently, lawsuits derived from union rivalry on which trade union will represent the workers, may last for many years, and due to the collective bargaining agreements could not be concluded for years, workers are become victims of trade union rivalry.

In the metal sector, a major and influential employer association has been engaged: the Turkish Employers' Association of Metal Industries (Türkiye Metal Sanayicileri Sendikası, MESS) was established in 1959 and has been known as Turkey's the oldest and most powerful employer organisation. MESS, a member of the Turkish Confederation of Employer Associations (Türkiye İşveren Sendikaları Konfederasyonu, TISK); has had an influential role on employers and government policies for years. Turgut Özal, former president of MESS; who was the deputy of prime minister in 1980 coup d'état, became the prime minister and then president of Republic of Turkey. Koç Group has a dominant role in MESS.

The metal workers' resistance and the wave of their strikes can be understood better considering in this historical context and the characteristics of the industrial relations in the metal sector. The metal workers' movement in 2015 is not a coincidence, but is a release of the tension between the workers and Türk Metal and as well as mould breaker in the sector. While Türk Metal refuses cooperation with other unions, it is in cooperation with MESS. Moreover, it is known that someone who resigns from Türk Metal and becomes member of other unions faces with dismissal.<sup>11</sup> The study of Nichols and Suğur (2005) has striking findings on the disconnection of the worker and trade union (Türk-Metal) relations in the metal sector.<sup>12</sup> Apart from the oppressive nature of Türk Metal, its distance from union democracy and its pro-employer attitude, and the labour controlling mechanism based on both force and consent in metal industry, it is emphasised that an additional labour controlling mechanism exists through trade unions that are pro-employer and without union democracy.<sup>13</sup>

### **Metal Storm: The Story of May-June Resistance of 2015 in the Automotive Industry**

The emergence of strikes and movement in May 2015 in leading automotive companies of Turkey was due to the reaction of workers against the 3 year-collective agreements<sup>14</sup> concluded between Türk Metal and MESS. In addition Türk Metal's trade unionism played the triggered role in this resistance. The most triggering incident was the collective bargaining agreement concluded between Türk Metal and MESS in the Bosch factory in Bursa. In 2012, 3,500 workers who resigned from Türk Metal became members of Birleşik Metal in the Bosch factory. However, a considerable number of workers turned back to the Türk Metal as a result of the pressure from the employer and Türk Metal. It took many years to solve the legal dispute between two unions; thereby Bosch collective agreement could not be concluded until April 2015. On the other hand, the metal group collective agreement had been concluded between Türk Metal and MESS in December 2014. Türk Metal signed a more satisfying collective agreement with Bosch due to the delay of the agreement and its attempts to prevent workers from going to Birleşik Metal. The issue that paved the way for the metal resistance has been the demand of workers to have same rights as Bosch workers. In addition to their request for wage rise, workers also requested free choice of unions, abandonment of Türk Metal from workplaces, and the ability to choose their own shop stewards freely.

Workers began to resist in the factories such as Tofaş, Ford and Renault by leaving work after their demands regarding the implementation of Bosch collective agreement were refused.<sup>15</sup> Initial developments of the metalworker resistance started in the factories Renault and Tofaş in mid-April 2015. Workers of Mako factory also joined these movements. First movements were protests that are less effective than strikes and work stoppages. The marches and protests in front of the union building and the factories turned into a demonstration at the city centre on 21 April. In addition, workers of Coşkunöz factory participated in the demonstrations towards the end of April. Türk Metal said ‘no’ to the demands of workers who visited the building of the Union. As a response, workers set time aside for 5 May and after this deadline, they started to resign from Türk Metal. It was reported that there were attacks to workers who resigned from the union.<sup>16</sup> At the beginning of May, some new factories as Delphi, Valeo, SKT joined the demonstrations. On 14 of May, MESS stated that the collective agreements would not be revised and claimed that actions of workers were illegal with its message to the mobile phones of the workers. Since 15 May 2015, movements of the metal workers jumped to a new phase: Widespread strikes and work stoppages. On 15 May, first Renault workers, then Tofaş and Coşkunöz workers went to strike. Following the declaration of MESS that movements were illegal, Pevrul Kavlak, president of Türk Metal Union, also called workers to stop the resistances. According to Kavlak, employer had the right of firing workers without compensation under these circumstances.<sup>17</sup> However, workers did not give heed to his words. Contrarily, on 18 May, workers of Mako went to strike.

On 20 May, protests areas exceeded beyond Bursa and workers of Ford Otosan, which is established in both Kocaeli and Eskişehir, joined the resistance movements. At the same day, workers of Ototrim and Valeo that are established in Bursa joined the others. On 21 May, workers of Türk Traktör, established in Ankara, supported the resistance. On 23 May, workers of Tofaş and Mako ended the strike and started their work after approval of some of their demands. Approved demands were as following: ‘stopping to fire workers who supported the movements, prevention of intervening of workers’ union preferences (Türk Metal would leave the factory) and wage rise.’ On the 12th day of the resistance, on 27 May, an agreement was also signed at Renault. This agreement was more comprehensive than others. Nine clauses of the agreement include ‘provisions as preventing dismissal of the workers involved in the resistance and prosecution on workers, withdrawals of the existing lawsuits, the protection of the freedom of association and the recognition of the representatives elected by the workers.’

Nonetheless those achievements at Renault could not be obtained in the Koç Group factories. On 2 June, workers of Türk Traktör ended their resistance after they were entitled to some partial gains. However, in a short time the employer started to fire workers contrary their promises. The resistance of Ford Otosan workers ended at the 15th day without any gains. After the resistance ended, a lot of workers were dismissed. The resistance that started from automotive factories continued in June including other metal factories such as LG Arçelik.

Employers and Türk Metal claimed that it was illegal to go on strikes and work stoppages by the metal workers. Turkey's labour legislation states all strikes are illegal except "interest" strikes following the disagreement on collective bargaining process. However; assessments based on this legislation would be misleading and limited. First of all, it should be emphasised that peaceful resistance and work stoppages are fundamental rights guaranteed by the conventions of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which are also ratified by Turkey. The Committee on Freedom of Association (CFA), a supervisory body of ILO, also guaranteed the right of workers' peaceful actions and work stoppages by several decisions:<sup>18</sup>

*"The right to strike should not be limited solely to industrial disputes that are likely to be resolved through the signing of a collective agreement; workers and their organizations should be able to express in a broader context, if necessary, their dissatisfaction as regards economic and social matters affecting their members' interests."*

*"Regarding various types of strike action denied to workers (wild-cat strikes, tools-down, go-slow, working to rule and sit-down strikes), the Committee considers that these restrictions may be justified only if the strike ceases to be peaceful."*

Moreover, both the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and The European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR) define peaceful worker movements as the basic rights. The 90th article of Turkish Constitution regards the provisions of international treaties and conventions on fundamental rights and freedoms above the domestic laws. Therefore, it is not possible announcing metal workers' movements as illegal by reasons based on the legislations of 12 September coup d'état of 1980. In fact, workers in Turkey have used many times their right to peaceful demonstration and work stoppages. It has been used in the peaceful movements particularly in the form of collective protests and work stoppages such as Şişecam, SEKA, Yatağan and TEKEL resistances. However, especially Koç group preferred to fire workers who had lead the movements by arguing that the protests were illegal, instead of understanding the reasons of these movements and paying attention to the workers' demands.

## **The Reasons of the Metal Resistance of 2015**

The main reason of the wave of strikes and resistances in the automotive sector is low wages. Hourly wages of metal workers within the coverage of collective agreements are relatively low compared to wages of workers in other sectors. Wages of workers -in the factories that are members of MESS- have a rank of 13th among the wages of 16 employer associations. In the workplaces member of MESS, wages are relatively low about 30 per cent compared to wages in other sectors such as glass, petro-chemical, medicine and paper. Lower wages than the ones in metal sector can only be seen in the sectors of food, textile and soil. Wages in all other sectors are above the metal sector. It can be better understood the leading motive of the movement if we add that most of the workers in the metal sector have less than 5-year experience and wages of new workers are even lower.<sup>19</sup>

Another important reason of the resistances is the accumulated anger to the authoritarian, bureaucratic, centralised and pro-employer union mentality in Türk Metal. It is known as authoritarian, centralist with lack of trade union democracy and it has turned to a typical oligarchical union by weakening the ties with its members and by the comfort derived from the close ties with employers. The ties between workers and Türk Metal have weakened dramatically due to the lack the shop steward election mechanism, the symbolic election of the delegates and the ignorance of the views during the collective bargaining processes. Although these problems are not unique to Türk Metal, it emerged as a sharp and typical example of this kind of trade unionism. The reactions to Türk Metal turned into a total opposition of trade unions from time to time. This negative attitude towards unions caused to weaknesses during the resistance and delayed the new memberships of workers, who left Türk Metal, into another union.

The movements in metal factories became widespread not through coordination but by affecting each other. It should be underlined that the resistance developed in a completely spontaneous basis and is away from directions of any political party or group or trade union. Big scale factories in automotive sector, which closely affect each other, have an important role in the expansion of the movements. The resistance mainly took place in Koç Group. Koç and MESS made serious efforts to break the resistance and did not surrender Türk Metal.

Gains of the workers varied in terms of the factories. In Renault, all demands of workers accepted and no one faced with dismissal. However, in Koç Group factories, gains of workers were quite limited and most of the workers were fired although it was promised the contrary. Each factory ‘saved’ itself because of the inexperience of workers and failure of ensuring coordination and solidarity between different factories.

The main interlocutor and loser of the movements of 2015 became the Türk Metal and its authoritarian, company unionism embodied there. Türk Metal experienced serious loss of prestige among metal workers. The loss was not only limited to the prestige. In January 2015, Türk Metal had 177,125 members. In July 2015, this number decreased to 166,250. Loss of the members of Türk Metal appears to be 10,875.<sup>20</sup> However, this number does not represent the actual number of resignations after the wave of resistance movements in metal sector. It would be difficult to measure the real effect of the resistance without knowing actual number of members of the Türk Metal in the beginning of May 2015. It is possible to say that loss of dues-paying members being in the scope of collective bargaining agreements is much higher. We can say that Türk Metal has 120,000 members in the coverage of the collective bargaining agreement. In other words, Türk Metal lost almost 10 percent of their dues-paying members. Most of resigned workers mainly became members of Birleşik Metal. Türk Metal sustains its tendency ignoring the results, scope and importance of the resistance. Türk Metal announced that 625 Turkish Liras would be distributed to the workers as a sort of aid from the budget of the union instead of attempting to solve the basic demands of the workers.<sup>21</sup> President Pevrul Kavlak spoke in the General Congress of Türk Metal that convened immediately after the metal resistance and tried to illustrate the protests of metal workers as ineffective. He said that movements occurred in 59 places out of 689 workplaces where they are organised and the number of resigned workers does not even constitute 15 per cent of the total members number.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the fact remains that this resistance happened in three big companies of the Turkish automotive industry and in some significant subsidiary companies. Thus the qualitative impact of the resistance is even higher than the quantitative one.

## **Evaluation**

Workers who resigned from Türk Metal have organised major strikes and resistances with their own initiative and solidarity –without the leadership of any trade union or political

organisation and external solidarity and influence– and performed a long-standing resistance against Turkey’s most powerful and organised business groups. This is a rare situation in history of Turkey’s industrial relations. The resistance of metal workers of 2015 will be remembered as one of the most important movements of working class history of Turkey along with the spectacular workers’ resistance on 15-16 June 1970 and the Spring Movement of 1989 mostly occurred in public sector.

2015 metal workers’ resistance could be reviewed as a rebellion to the status quo of unionism constructed after the 12 September 1980 in Turkey. It occurred as a reaction and a burst of anger to the authoritarian, centralised, and bureaucratic Türk Metal. The metal workers resistance of 2015 is the most important one among the recently started examples of non-union workers’ resistances. In addition to non-union movements, movements of unionised workers towards both union and employer have been started as a reaction to their union’s cumbersome bureaucracy and passiveness. The resistance of metal workers is the peak of this kind of resistance.

Before the coup d’état of 12 September the majority of the metal workers was organised under Maden-İş, however during the post-coup d’état period, a new trade union structure was built. While the activities of the DİSK and its member unions were stopped and their leaders were arrested and were on trial with death sentence, an iron labour discipline system established in the sector under the auspices of MESS and Türk Metal. During the post-coup d’état period, the new union status quo and industrial relations system weakened trade unions. The new industrial relations system based on prohibitions and thresholds reduced the impact of unions and undermined union democracy. Trade union oligarchies have become powerful with the thresholds, cumbersome bureaucracy and disconnection from workers. Majority of the unions has become an additional labour controlling mechanism instead of protecting and improving workers’ rights. While trade unions have weakened, most of the unions have become a glasshouse prison (or “*panopticon*” prison) to the workers. In addition the metal sector and Türk Metal have become a sort of laboratories for the previously mentioned labour controlling mechanism.

As a consequence of this resistance, the current unionism that does not take into consideration the internal democracy, does not take into account opinions of its members during collective bargaining, and does not elect its shop stewards and delegates through fair and free elections

took a severe damage. The anger of workers erupted against unions which have been “compatible” with employers but not with workers. ‘Good old days’ were over for the trade union oligarchies. It is hard to continue with the authoritarian and pro-employer unionism in the metal sector. The resistance of metal workers in 2015 means a great hope for a democratic, participatory and transparent unionism in Turkey. The movement of the metal workers has shaken the foundations of the industrial relation system and the trade union status quo created after the coup d’état. It will not be a prophecy if we conclude that this shake seems to continue.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup>Aziz Çelik (2015a), “AKP Döneminde Sendikal Haklar: Sendikasız-Grevsiz Kaynaşmış Bir Kitleyiz!” (Trade Union Rights in the AKP Period: We are a United Group of People without Union and Strike!) *in* Himmet, Fitrat, Piyasa AKP Döneminde Sosyal Politika (Benevolence, Disposition, Market, Social Policy in the AKP Period) (Ed. Meryem Koray-Aziz Çelik), İstanbul: İletişim Publishing.

<sup>2</sup>Aziz Çelik (2015b), “Turkey’s New Labour Regime under the Justice and Development Party,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 51, Number 4, July 2015.

<sup>3</sup>Murat Özveri, *Türkiye’nin Toplu İş Sözleşmesi Yetki Sistemi ve Sendikasızlaştırma (1963-2009)*. (Collective Bargaining Agreement Competency System and Deunionisation in Turkey) Ankara University, Faculty of Politics Publication, 2013.

<sup>4</sup>Onur Bakır and Deniz Akdoğan, “Türkiye’de Sendikalaşma ve Özel Sektörde Sendikal Örgütlenme,” (Unionisation in Turkey and Trade Union Organising in the Private Sector) *Türk-İş Magazine*, Number 383, 2009.

<sup>5</sup>Aziz Çelik (2015b),

<sup>6</sup>Workers and public officers have different labour and trade union legislation and have to organise separately. Furthermore, because public officers are completely devoid of strikes and can not conduct free collective negotiations, it is rather difficult for them to be taken into account in terms of unionisation.

<sup>7</sup>For further assessments, also see: Aziz Çelik (2010), *Vesayetden Siyasete Türkiye’de Sendikacılık* (From Paternalism to the Political Participation, Trade Unionism in Turkey) (1946-1967), İstanbul: İletişim Publishing.

<sup>8</sup>Ministry of Labour and Social Security, Labour Statistics Information System [Accessed on 29 July, 2015].

<sup>9</sup>Mustafa Özbek, had to leave Türk Metal chairman position in 2009 after being arrested within the scope of the Ergenekon lawsuit.

<sup>10</sup>Aziz Çelik (2015), “Zırva tevil götürmez”(Blather is Nonsense in Essence) *Birgün newspaper*, 26.02.2015.

<sup>11</sup>Özgür Öztürk, “Türkiye’de Sendikal Mücadele, Sermaye Birikimi, MESS ve Koç Holding,” (Union Struggle, The Accumulation of the Capital, MESS and Koç Company in Turkey) *Praksis*, Volume 19, 2009, pp.337-361.

<sup>12</sup>Theo Nichols and Nadir Suğur, *Global İşletme, Yerel Emek Türkiye’de İşçiler ve Modern Fabrika* (Global Management, Local Labour, Workers in Turkey and Modern Factory) İstanbul: İletişim Publications, 2005.

<sup>13</sup>Hakan Koçak, “Metal İşçilerinin İsyanı Nelere İşaret Ediyor?” (What are the points of the rebellion of metal workers?) [Accessed on 15th August 2015], Available at:

<http://www.birikimdergisi.com/guncel/metal-iscilerinin-isyani-nelere-isaret-ediyor>

<sup>14</sup>Collective bargaining agreements are concluded for one or three years. However, almost all of the collective agreements in Turkey are signed for two years. The three-year agreements are not preferred because they are less effective in the protection of wages.

<sup>15</sup>Up-to date information related with the resistance has been obtained from the websites [sendikal.org](http://sendikal.org) and [evrensel.net](http://evrensel.net) if not otherwise indicated.

<sup>16</sup>“Metal workers stood for resignation, Türk Metal gangs attacked workers.” [Accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2015], Available at:

<http://www.sendikal.org/2015/05/metal-iscisi-istifa-icin-ayaga-kalkti-turk-metal-ceteleri-iscilere-saldirdi/#!>

<sup>17</sup>“Sendikadan ‘eyleme son verin’ çağırısı” (The Call End the actions from the Union) *Milliyet* 18.05.2015. [Accessed on 15 August 2015], Available at:

<http://www.milliyet.com.tr/sendikadan-eyleme-son-verin-ekonomi/detay/2060554/default.htm>



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<sup>18</sup>ILO, Freedom of Association-Digest of Decisions and Principles of the Freedom of Association Committee of the Governing Body, Fifth (revised) edition, Geneva, 2006. Paragraphs: 531 and 545.

<sup>19</sup>TİSK, 2013 Çalışma İstatistikleri ve İşgücü Maliyeti Araştırması (2013 Labour Statistics and Labour Costs Survey), 2015.

<sup>20</sup>Çalışma ve Sosyal Güvenlik Bakanlığı (*The Ministry of Labour and Social Security*), İşkollarındaki İşçi Sayıları ve Sendikaların Üye Sayılarına İlişkin 2015 Temmuz Ayı İstatistikleri Hakkında Tebliğ (*Communique about July 2015 statistics on number of workers and unions in the sectors*), Resmi Gazete (*Official Journal*), 29 June 2015

<sup>21</sup>Türk Metal will distribute 100 million liras to its 160,000 members [Accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2015], Available at:

<http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/ekonomi/29248874.asp>

<sup>22</sup> Pevrul Kavlak, the opening speech delivered at the 15th General Congress of Turk Metal, on 1 August 2015, Ankara [http://www.turkmetal.org.tr/bu-genel-kurul--bir-milat-olacak\\_icerik\\_200174-1.html](http://www.turkmetal.org.tr/bu-genel-kurul--bir-milat-olacak_icerik_200174-1.html) (Accessed on 15 August 2015)