

## **The political incorporation of labor in Turkey: tracing the origins of a nationalist path**

**Abstract:** This study makes an important contribution to the literature on labor incorporation in developing areas based on existing historiography and archival material from Turkey. Specifically, we argue that the political incorporation of labor during the early period of state building is strongly influenced by the elite preferences over who constitutes a nation. In doing so, we address a neglected dimension by putting the emphasis on ethno-religious politics: the founding fathers of modern Turkey pushed for a homogenizing program that prioritized Muslim-Turks over other minority groups, eventually paving the way to the state-led incorporation of labor. This is different from the experience of most Latin American countries that the existing literature draws on. Our findings make an important contribution to theoretical debates by highlighting the subtle link between identity politics, nation-building and labor's incorporation pathways in developing contexts.

## Introduction

A major stream among existing works on the politicization of labor in the developing world highlights a strong link between the power of the elite and the incorporation pathways of unions, mostly based on evidence from Latin America (Valenzuela 1989, Roxborough 1981, Collier and Collier 1991, Buchanan 1995, Mahoney 2001).

According to one dominant framework, state-led incorporation is likely to prevail in regions where landed oligarchy holds a very powerful political position and enjoys considerable influence over electoral processes.<sup>1</sup> If the landed oligarchy is politically powerful but has limited capacity to shape electoral outcomes, then labor unions are expected to follow a party-led incorporation path, paving the way to the birth of labor-based parties (Collier and Collier 1991). However, this theoretical framework says little about labor's incorporation paths in contexts where no close-knit group of landed oligarchy exists. For example, during the formative years of Turkey—where landowners were not capable of fully centralizing political power in their hands—the party-led incorporation attempts were blocked, and the state-led incorporation of labor ensued. This is interesting, because the political party in control—Republican People's Party (RPP)—did not seek broader legitimacy by allying itself with a burgeoning labor movement at a very critical time of state-building. What explains the reluctance of the RPP to ally with unions during the formative years of the new republic ?

In this paper, we argue that in the absence of a united and politically dominant landed oligarchy, the political incorporation of labor is strongly mediated by the preferences of new elites who emerge as powerful actors during the early stages of state formation. In the case of Turkey, labor's future pathway has been largely influenced by the founding fathers' ideological choices over who constitutes a nation. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the triumph of the nationalist leaders subsequently led to a process marked by a religious exclusion of minority groups from the core group defined in the new constitution. As such, the multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition of labor

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<sup>1</sup> State-led labor incorporation is a special mode where “the principal agency through which the incorporation period was initiated was the legal and bureaucratic apparatus of the state, and the principal goal of the leaders who initiated incorporation was the control and depoliticization of the labor movement” (Collier and Collier 1991, 8).

appeared incompatible with the ideology of the ruling party, whose members imagined a homogenous nation.<sup>2</sup>

This exclusionary ideological orientation shaped organized labor's incorporation path in later stages. In the absence of a strong alliance with a political party, the demographic composition of important workplaces marked by strong unionism began to change under the new republic. In particular, the purging of the non-Muslims has crippled these unions' capacity to recruit new members since most union leaders were of Armenian, Greek or Jewish origin. As the homogenization of the workforce accelerated, labor unions became increasingly dependent on the state to survive and lost their political significance during the formative years of the new republic. This process subsequently led to their co-optation and a political incorporation under a state-led path.

Scholars agree that the labor activism in the late Ottoman Empire was undoubtedly repressed by the Republican government under the rule of Mustafa Kemal. The question that begs an answer is why Turkey's ruling elites chose to do so, instead of seeking to rally actively organized labor behind the new state in the making. It is difficult to explain this solely based on the authoritarian tendencies of the republican regime: partisan alliance with organized labor is not an exclusive feature of democratic regimes. Arguments that highlight the structural weakness of the working population in terms of its size and militancy are also far from convincing. In fact, the 1910s and 1920s witnessed the rapid growth of labor movements organized across multiple sectors and mobilized under diverse ideological banners, especially in port cities.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we need to move beyond structural dynamics and pay a closer attention to the ideational sources behind the party's choice to distance itself from the labor movement.

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on Turkish nationalism, see also Maksudyan (2005), Ozkirimli and Sofos (2008), Akturk (2011).

<sup>3</sup> While the late-Ottoman economy relied on agricultural commodity exports during most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, large-scale industrialization and infrastructural projects were initiated by incoming European investors towards the end of the 1800s. At the same time, urban centers saw a rapid increase in their population thanks to a large number of incoming immigrants. For example, between 1856 and 1914, the population of Istanbul nearly doubled due to immigration and domestic migration, moving from 526,464 to 977,262 (Koc 2010).

Much of the influential research on the political incorporation of labor focuses on cases from Latin America and develops theoretical frameworks based the experiences of urban workers who rapidly moved away from rural areas controlled by powerful landowners. These explanations rest on an exceptionally rich historiography that scholars build on when writing about cases such as Argentina, Brazil, and Peru, to name a few.<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, the limited availability of primary historical data poses a major obstacle for developing a more nuanced understanding of organized labor's political incorporation in other contexts such as South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa. In that sense, the broader generalizations derived from the experience of Latin American workers have limited capacity to account for divergent experiences elsewhere, including that of Turkey.

Our findings make an important contribution to theoretical debates by highlighting the link between diversity and the politicization of unions in the Global South. Going beyond labor's resources, networks and political strategies, we highlight the critical role of nation-building in relation to the emergence and political incorporation of organized worker unions. Unlike most cases in Latin America, the labor activism of the late Ottoman period lost much of its vigor by the mid-1920s due in part to a political agenda that pushed for the ethno-religious homogenization of the labor force. Together with the political defeat of the populist tendencies within the national movement, the incorporation of labor was eventually seen as politically unfavorable under the RPP leadership.

By placing the analytic focus on the late-Ottoman/early Republican experience, we can probe deeper into the processes of labor organization during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and reveal how nation-building policies can become crucially linked to the political incorporation of labor unions in developing areas.<sup>5</sup> The analysis based on primary and secondary resources complement these debates by revealing the long-lasting implications of exclusionary policies on labor's capacity to organize and

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<sup>4</sup> For a study on the political incorporation of labor in Argentina, see James 1993. For a study on Brazil, see French 1991. For a study on Peru, see Drinot 2011. A recent compilation of essays on the political incorporation also focuses on cases from Latin America, see Silva and Rossi 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Following Mylonas (2010) we define nation-building as “the process whereby ruling political elites attempt to make the political and the national units overlap” (Mylonas 2010, 83).

mobilize.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, we also seek to go beyond studies that explain working class formation through an exclusive lens on materialistic conditions (Akin 2009, 168-169).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. We first discuss existing works that problematize the political incorporation of labor and situate our argument in relation to these debates. The next section presents historical evidence from Turkey based on existing historiography and primary data, highlighting the antecedent conditions, critical junctures and diverging paths. The conclusion discusses the long-term implications of our findings.

### **The Political Incorporation of Labor in Developing Areas**

Political incorporation of labor refers to the legalization and institutionalization of labor unions and creation of institutionalized channels for resolving conflicts “to supersede the *ad hoc* use of repression characteristics of early periods” (Collier and Collier 1991: 7). Formally, it encompasses a series of legal codes that govern trade union formation, collective wage bargaining and industrial action. Informally, political incorporation includes a series of measures that enable worker representation within party organizations and/or legislative and executive domains. While in most developed settings these schemes emerged out of intense rivalry between workers and business in established nation-states, the political incorporation of labor in the developing world followed a different route.<sup>7</sup> Across most areas in the Global South, labor became a salient actor in the public sphere either through a party-led or state-led incorporation.

The capacity of local unions to mobilize around shared goals and objectives is primarily influenced by the historical terms under which organized labor first gained ground as a

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<sup>6</sup> Exclusionary nation-building policies seek to remove non-core groups through population exchange, deportation, or mass killing (Mylonas 2010, 85) or other means that seek to drive them out of the physical borders of the nation-state. On the other hand, inclusionary policies involve assimilation and accommodation. While assimilation forces non-core groups to adapt to the core-group in terms of their way of life and culture, accommodation designates institutional protection of minority rights and endorses co-existence of different ethnic and religious groups as part of the national unit (Mylonas 2010, 85).

<sup>7</sup> For example, advanced industrialized countries like Germany have formally incorporated the creation of *works councils* at the company and plant level into the legal framework as early as 1950s (Thelen 1991) and practically enabled workers to have a direct influence over production, personnel policy and wages, which is largely absent in the Global South.

relevant societal actor (Thompson 1963, Therborn 1977). An important dynamic that shapes this capacity hinges on whether unions are politically incorporated into or excluded from decision-making processes at the national level (Collier and Collier 1991, Collier and Mahoney 1999). While in some advanced democracies the historical incorporation of labor has taken place either under a societal corporatist arrangement (Schmitter 1974) characterized by some form of voluntary coordination between business associations and unions (Wilensky 1981; Katzenstein 1985; Thelen 1991) or evolved under a pluralist environment (Golden 1986), these Northern experiences were not exactly replicated in the context of most developing countries. Across these settings, the political incorporation of labor evolved in the absence of a European-style state-corporatism where the private interest groups were *not* strictly organized into a “singular, compulsory, noncompetitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories” (Schmitter 1974; 93).

In the context of Latin America, whether the initial incorporation was initiated by the state or a political party shaped the mobilization capacity of labor in the later stages. While Collier and Collier (1991) expect state-led incorporation to prevail in regions where landed oligarchy enjoyed a very powerful political position (Mahoney 2001, 277)—as in Brazil and Chile—unusually powerful elites are not always equipped with a capacity to influence electoral politics, as in Argentina (Collier and Collier 1991, 104). When the latter is the case, Collier and Collier (1991) expect party-led incorporation to prevail. For example, in the case of Argentina, the Perón government embarked on a populist inclusion strategy under *Partido Justicialista* (PJ) as the government turned away from an elitist-liberal to popular nationalism (vom Hau 2008).<sup>8</sup> This added a new impetus to the political incorporation of labor under a party-led coalition and turned unions into significant actors with plenty of influence in policy making processes. In other cases where a heterogenous oligarchy was able to garner considerable political power—as in Peru, the political incorporation of labor was also initiated by a labor-based political party (APRA). In contrast to a more diverse ethnic composition of worker unions in Argentina, white and mestizo Peruvians were

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<sup>8</sup> It must be added that popular nationalist “discourses recognized the diverse racial or ethnic origins of the nation, but intended to blend those differences into a homogeneous national present” (Itzigsohn and vom Hau 2006, 200).

identified as those that constituted the privileged core of a new nation state in the post-independence era, including membership in labor unions (Drinot 2011).

However, this theoretical framework's predictive power reaches its limits when tested across cases beyond Latin America. For example, in Turkey where landed oligarchs were unable to monopolize political power during the late Ottoman and early Republican era, the political incorporation of labor was subdued along the broader goals of state-building following the collapse of the Empire. The ruling political party curiously refrained from allying itself with the emerging labor movement in the early years of the republic. This leads us to unpack the ideational motivation behind the labor incorporation trajectories. In the absence of politically powerful landed oligarchy, the political incorporation of labor in industrializing areas is strongly influenced by the dominant elite's ideology. In most Latin American cases with a history of party-led incorporation, an incipient populist movement informs policies that promoted the political incorporation of labor. On the other hand, in early republican Turkey, debates on populism were strongly linked to discussions over who constitutes a nation with an exclusionary angle.

Exclusionary nation building policies may paralyze incipient labor organizations and prevent them from developing effective strategies to recruit new members, organize across multiple sectors and build a critical capacity for negotiation. This is because identity-based divisions where one group is favored over another harm the development of a class-based solidarity networks and reduce trust among the rank-and-file. When the activists come from a minority background, the rulers with an exclusionary orientation may appeal to ethnic or religious majority to repress critical voices and thereby legitimize their choice in the name of defending the interests of the nation. Thus, the weakening of class-based ties may propagate new forms of division, especially when workers face multiple challenges under policies that repress and isolate them. Under these circumstances, the political party at power is not compelled to build an alliance with labor unions since it can control and depoliticize labor unrest much easier by way of imposing strict legal barriers on labor mobilization, such as the banning of strikes, limits on union membership terms and/or abolishing collective bargaining rights. This paves the way to the further weakening of labor when workers remain permanently

silenced under an ethno-nationalist state apparatus that closes-off the executive domain to class-based representation.

### *Methodology and case selection*

In order to elucidate the link between incumbent party's ideological orientation and the political incorporation of labor, we focus on a single, exploratory case study using process tracing. This allows us to identify the causal mechanism at work while generating new hypotheses to be tested across a larger sample (Gerring and Cojocaru 2016). The period of late-Ottoman and early-Republican Turkey offers a unique opportunity to unpack this process because it serves as a critical juncture that paves the way to state-led incorporation of labor, with notable implications on the relationship between unions, employers and the state in later stages. Based on existing historiography and circumstantial primary data, we reveal—step-by-step—how the founding fathers' preference for ethnic and religious homogenization stifled a growing multi-ethnic labor force where workers coming from a minority background systematically disappeared from the rank-and-file.

We choose to probe deeper into the early Turkish experience because until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the economic development trajectory appears very similar to most Latin American cases. Late-Ottoman empire was a peripheral economy where production was dominated by agriculture until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Later, growing integration with international markets and the increasing impact of European economic dominance boosted agricultural production for exports. In addition to the provincial town and cities, commercialization of the agricultural sector went hand in hand with the rise of port cities, including Istanbul, İzmir, Salonika and Beirut.<sup>9</sup> These cities emerged as important urban centers and economic hubs that served a growing network of international trade.

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<sup>9</sup> For the Ottoman port cities see Çağlar Keyder & Y. Eyüp Özveren & Donald Quartaert (Ed.) - *Doğu Akdeniz'de Liman Kentleri 1800-1914* (trc. Gül Çağalı Güven), Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, İstanbul 11994. See also Fuhrmann and V. Kechriotis, The late Ottoman port-cities and their inhabitants: subjectivity, urbanity, and conflicting orders, *Mediterranean Historical Review* Vol. 24, No. 2, December 2009.



The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the growth of industrial workers. A major driver of this process was the inflow of a substantial amount of foreign direct investment. Thus, ports and railways received the highest share of direct capital investments—which seemed of great importance for the integration of the Ottoman economy with the world markets (Pamuk, 1994: 71-92; Quataert, 1987: 18-22).<sup>10</sup> European firms and holding companies made investments in urban public utilities as well. Similar to their counterparts in Latin America, a considerable proportion of these investments concentrated in sectors such as transportation, water supply, as well as gas and energy production. This was also accompanied by a similar expansion of the labor force with experts and workers from Europe (Martykanova and Kocaman 2018), in addition to the greater diversification of the ethno-religious composition of the local workers including non-Muslim (*gayr-i müslim*) workers of Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish confessions. While estimates on the size of the industrial labor force in the late Ottoman period are unreliable, a population census of 1894-1895 classified 186,000 people as workers (*amele*) (Makal, 1999: 40).<sup>11</sup> According to another source, there were approximately 400,000 workers in Ottoman domains as of 1910. 23,000 of them were in Istanbul 275,000 in Anatolia. 165,000 of waged workers were employed in weaving sector. The overall number for industrial workers was estimated 256,855 in 1927. (Akkaya 2002: 136). Most of these workers were employed by the joint-stock companies owned by European capital groups in railways, public utilities, mines, tobacco industry, and manufacturing sectors. Just like in Latin America, initial labor activism emerged across these industries.

This is where sectoral similarities end and divergences become starker. In Latin America, the working class mobilization emerged in the midst of a political struggle between the big landowners and the new political elite in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, in Argentina, prior to the arrival of Juan Perón to power, a fast-growing labor movement began to take hold of urban areas, organized mostly in the private sector (Collier and Collier 1991; Etchemendy 2011). However, unlike in North America and

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<sup>10</sup> This pattern largely reflects the experience of other peripheral economies at the time. For example, in Latin America industrialization took off in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mostly by private and foreign entrepreneurs who benefited from a rapidly growing railroad network, urbanization, and an open immigration policy (Rock 2019).

<sup>11</sup> See Ahmet Makal (1999: 39-41) for various sources providing different statistics regarding the number of the workers in the Ottoman Empire.

Western Europe, the unions lacked power to effectively negotiate with business and contribute to the birth of a European style corporatism. Still, these entities were politically important for burgeoning parties that challenged the establishment. In Argentina, Perón saw a major electoral opportunity as the numbers of unionized industrial workers grew rapidly, initiating the pathway to incorporate labor as a major political ally of the PJ as opposed to political parties that had support from landed oligarchy. Eventually, under Perón's populism, labor unions became part of decision-making under a non-hierarchically organized, left-populist party (Collier and Collier 1991, McGuire 1992, Levitsky 2003).

On the other hand, the labor movement in Turkey emerged in the midst of a different political struggle. In the absence of powerful landed oligarchy, the nationalist leadership emerged as the dominant group with considerable say on state-building process as the empire crumbled. This was substantially characterized by a strong preference for Muslim economic actors under the official ideology of Turkish nationalism (Aktar 2001, Koraltürk 2011, Bali 2001: 196-240). While the religious preference was not officially enshrined in the constitution, the religious identity was de facto designated as a marker of privilege to have access to public and private goods. Thus, as urban areas in the Ottoman Empire also witnessed the birth of multiple labor organizations during the early industrial era (Yıldırım 2013), workers were later divided along emerging fault lines after the regime change and the birth of Turkish republic.

More importantly, unlike in Latin American cases where exclusionary policies were contested by the unions, the labor movement in Turkey took a more acquiescent stance and RPP proponents worked for the ethno-religious exclusion of minorities. The most prominent case in point is the General Union of Workers (Umum Amele Birliği), which operated during the formative period of the Republic of Turkey. Rather than challenging the dominant ideology that called for a homogenization of the nation, the new labor organizers endorsed a commitment to the official line and derived their benefits largely provided by the state. The next section unpacks this experience in further detail.

## **Labor's Ethno-nationalist Path to Political Incorporation in Turkey**

### ***The Emergence of Labor Unions in the late-Ottoman Era***

The rise of organized labor movement in the Ottoman empire emerged much later than Europe. During much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the great majority of the population concentrated in the countryside and the average peasant family unit lived at the level of subsistence. Increasing integration with international markets and the growing impact of European economic dominance promoted agricultural production for export in this period. In addition to the provincial towns and cities, commercialization of agricultural sector went hand in hand with the rise of port cities, such as İzmir, Salonika and Beirut, as important urban centers and economic hubs that served the Empire's growing international trade. Istanbul, the Ottoman capital city, was no doubt the Empire's most important cultural, financial, and economic center with a population of approximately 1 million at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Ottoman craftsmen, artisans, and merchants were traditionally organized into guilds, which "...acted to safeguard the livelihood of their members, restricting production, controlling quality and prices." (Quataert, 2005: 136). In the port cities, a considerable part of the Ottoman labor force consisted of porters, boatmen, and stevedores. Wage workers employed in industrial production constituted only a minority of the Ottoman laboring classes. Initially, industrialization was first initiated by the state, which founded large-scale factories in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to manufacture goods intended for governmental and military use (Clark, 1974: 65-66). But the workshops that employed 50 to 100 workers remained exceptional even in Istanbul, where the early industrialization efforts of the Ottoman state remained limited. The majority of the Ottoman workers were employed by the small shops run by a master, a journeyman, and an apprentice (Kırlı, 2001: 128).

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the expansion of the Ottoman labor force. One of the major dynamics of this process was the increasing inflow of foreign direct investment (Geyikdağı, 2011: 76-134). Given their importance for the integration of the Ottoman economy with the world markets, ports and railways received the highest share of FDI (Pamuk, 1994: 71-92; Quataert, 1987: 18-22). Similar to Latin American

experiences like Argentina, the European firms and holding companies invested in urban public utilities as well. Until the beginning of the First World War, a considerable proportion of European capital concentrated in such sectors as transportation, water supply, as well as gas and energy production. The joint-stock companies operated by the European capital groups employed a considerable number of workers across multiple sectors. This expansion of the labor force with the influx of European capital was accompanied by a further diversification of the ethno-religious composition of the working population (Yıldırım, 2013: 73-83). Non-Muslim (gayr-i müslim) workers of Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish confessions formed a significant part of the Ottoman labor force. According to the available statistics from 1915, Orthodox Greeks formed 60% of industrial workers, Armenians 15%, and Jews 10%. In 1919, 85% of 22,000 workers employed in manufacturing industry consisted of non-Muslims in western Anatolia (Akkaya, 2002, 136). Moreover, given the dearth of trained and specialized workers in new industrial technologies, the Ottoman state invited experts from European countries as well (Martykanova and Kocaman 2018: 239-245). Similarly, foreign companies operating in Ottoman domains gave preference to European specialists for the positions that required technical and executive expertise. They also employed a large number of foreign nationals to meet their need for skilled labor force (Martykanova and Kocaman 2018: 245-249).

It was during the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the first initiatives of unionization outside the guilds emerged among the Ottoman workers. Different groups of workers joined charity organizations and then founded social and cultural clubs as well as political associations (Yıldırım, 2013: 100-107). Beginning in 1870s, workers organized strike movements in different economic sectors throughout the Empire's industrialized areas and labor activism concentrated especially in the state-run factories of Istanbul at the beginning (Yıldırım, 2013: 208-230). The known examples of trade unions focusing primarily on the wages and working conditions of their members were established in the first years of the 1900s. In 1901, for example, the Society for the Felicity of Tobacco Workers (Tütün Amelesi Saadet Cemiyeti) was founded in the Ottoman Macedonian city of Kavala. In 1905, it led one of the largest strike actions of the Ottoman workers prior to the Constitutional Revolution of July 1908 and had some

4,100 members from the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish workers of the Tobacco Régie around the time of the Revolution (Yıldırım, 2013, 111).<sup>12</sup>

### ***The Rise of CUP***

The immediate aftermath of the Constitutional Revolution witnessed the rise of the largest wave of labor mobilization in Ottoman history (Karakışla, 1992). Only 92 labor strikes had occurred in Ottoman domains between 1870 and 1908 (Yıldırım, 2013, 114-115). During the five months that followed the July Revolution, 143 strike movement broke out in various sectors of the Ottoman economy and in different parts of the Empire, including but not limited to Istanbul, İzmir, Aydın, Zonguldak, Salonika, Monastir, Beirut, and Damascus. The labor strikes of this period were, to a large extent, spontaneous actions.<sup>13</sup> However, benefiting from the relatively liberal political atmosphere of the post-revolutionary period, the Ottoman workers were engaged in an unprecedented movement of unionization at the same time.

Meanwhile, the socialist movement began to take root. The Empire's Christian communities, especially the Bulgarian and Armenian communities, were the first to organize socialist movements (Tunçay and Zürcher, 2010). The Social Democrat Hunchakian Party and the socialist Armenian Revolutionary Federation had already been founded before the Second Constitutional Period (1908-1918). Additionally, the Socialist Labor Federation founded in Salonika in 1909 brought together the workers of different ethnic and sectarian belongings, recruiting members from the Jewish, Muslim, Bulgarian and Greek communities of the city (Haupt and Dumont, 2013). The Turkish Socialist Center was formed in Istanbul around the same time under the influence of the Bulgarian Narrow Socialists (Bulgarian Social Democratic Workers' Party), recruiting members especially from the Greek-Orthodox community of the city (Benlisoy, 2018). Founded in 1910, on the other hand, the Ottoman Socialist Party was organized particularly among the Muslims (Tunçay, 2009: 44-57).

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<sup>12</sup> For the collective movements of the tobacco workers in İskeçe and Kavala see Can Nacar, "Labor Activism and the State in the Ottoman Tobacco Industry," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 46(3), 533-551

<sup>13</sup> For a reivew of the the strike movements that occured in the late Ottoman Empire see Şehmus Güzel, "Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e İşçi Hareketi ve Grevler," *Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e Türkiye Ansiklopedisi*, Cilt 3, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1985), s. 803-830.

The most important result of the Constitutional Revolution was the coming to power of the *Committee of Union and Progress* (CUP). The CUP became the Ottoman Empire's most influential political movement during this period (Kansu, 1999).<sup>14</sup> At the same time, it had an ambiguous relationship with the labor movements: initially, after seizing indirect control of the government, the Unionists tolerated labor strikes, partly because they did not intend to alienate the workers from the constitutional regime. However, when they concluded that the strikes threatened the public order, the Unionist began to turn against labor activism (Karakışla, 2007: 48-51). In October 1908, the Ottoman government issued a temporary law that restricted labor strikes in public sectors, such as railways, ports, and illumination (Gülmez, 1983: 1-44). After this law, labor mobilization lost some momentum and the number of strike movements immediately declined from 143 in the first five months of the revolution to 65 in 1909-1911, 8 in 1912, and 3 in 1913 (Yıldırım, 2013: 283).

### ***Corporatism and the Representation of the Professions Program***

Given that majority of organized labor in the late-Ottoman period included a large number of Greeks, Armenians and Jewish workers (Akkaya 2002, 135-136), CUP was less willing to allow these groups follow their independent agendas. As labor activism completely disappeared by the outbreak of World War I, the CUP consolidated its control over the guild associations. In addition to small shopkeepers, artisans, and various occupational groups, they organized, especially in the port cities, a significant segment of the laboring classes, such as the porters, dockers, bargemen and lightermen, workers of shipment and unloading.<sup>15</sup> Particularly the Istanbul branch of the CUP played a crucial role in the re-organization and modernization of guilds into labor corporations under Unionist control. In 1915, while the upper cadres unleashed a program for the mass deportation of the Armenians (Akcem 2012, Bulutgil 2017), the leadership of the CUP's Istanbul branch initiated the founding of the *Society of Tradesmen*, a Unionist organization that centralized the administration of more than 50

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<sup>14</sup> CUP is also known to be the predecessor of RPP, since many of the founding fathers of the new republic were former members of CUP.

<sup>15</sup> For the CUP's influence over the guilds and their role in the boycott movements targeting the Empire's Christian communities, see Y. Doğan Çetinkaya, *The young Turks and the boycott movement: Nationalism, protest and the working classes in the formation of modern Turkey*, IB Tauris, 2013.

guild associations.<sup>16</sup> In the course of World War I, a political circle associated with the CUP's Istanbul branch formulated a corporatist political program, called Representation of Professions (*Meslek-i Temsil*) (Tekeli and İlkin, 2003). It suggested the reorganization of political and economic life based on corporations to be formed by nine occupational groups: farmers/shepherds, artisans, craftsmen, merchants, workers, officials/employees, military officers, miners and sailors.<sup>17</sup>

The Ottoman defeat in World War I did not allow the Representation of Professions to be implemented, but this populist program based on corporatist principles maintained its importance in the next years. Soon after the signing of the Armistice of Mudros on October 30, 1918, the CUP fell from power and the Allied forces began to occupy Ottoman territory, including the capital Istanbul. Meanwhile, the remaining Unionist cadres took important initiatives in the organization of a resistance movement (Zürcher, 1984: 68-105; Tanör, 2002). The headquarters of the movement was moved to the central Anatolian town of Ankara, where the Turkish Grand National Assembly was inaugurated in April 1920. The Representation of Professions program had considerable following among the Unionist cadres involved in the Turkish national movement (Makal, 1999: 85-96).

One of them was Numan Efendi, a Unionist worker elected to the Ottoman parliament from Istanbul in December 1919 (Ülker, 2019). Numan clearly subscribed to the program in question. He identified himself as a national socialist claiming that internationalism was incompatible with the Turkish working class. He saw his election as an important step towards the formation of a truly national assembly, where all socio-economic layers of the nation should be represented. In March 1920, Numan was arrested and then sent to exile in Malta by the Allied authorities that established military control over Istanbul dispersing the Ottoman Parliament in March 1920. He was released in October 1921, made it to Ankara and joined the National Assembly as an Istanbul deputy. Before Numan arrived, the Representation of Professions program had been discussed in the National Assembly during the negotiations over the

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<sup>16</sup> For the bylaws of the Society of Tradesmen, see "Esnaf Cemiyetleri Nizamnamesi," *Tasvir-i Efkar*, 4 Nisan 1915, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> For an account of the historical development of this program, see "Meslek-i Temsilcilik Ne Demektir," *Meslek*, no: 1, 15 Aralık 1924, p. 5-6. Mete Tunçay summarized and much of this article and discussed it in his book *Türkiye'de Sol Akımlar I* pp. 304-305.

Constitution of 1921 (*Teşkilat-ı Esasiye*) (Makal, 1999: 85-96; Akın, 1992). Although quite a few of the deputies supported it, the Constitution adopted in January 1921 reflected the principles of the program that Mustafa Kemal submitted to the National Assembly, which did not make any reference to Representation of Professions (Toprak, 2011). This was an important turning point. With the exclusion of the Representation of Professions from the Constitution, the political and ideological influence of corporatism in the Turkish national movement remained limited to a small Unionist faction. However, this faction would play a significant role in the labor activism of the last phase of the armistice period.

Numan Usta returned to Istanbul in December 1922. Before Numan's arrival, Istanbul had seen the largest labor mobilization since the second constitutional period. More than 30 strikes had taken place (Yıldırım, 2013: 293-294) and there had been a general trend of unionization among the workers in the diverse sectors of the economy. The Turkish Socialist Party (TSP) had operated as a confederation of many different labor unions and associations. By the time Numan arrived in Istanbul, however, the labor movement had been in decline and the TSP had lost control over the workers.<sup>18</sup> There was no longer a prominent labor organization which had once unified a large proportion of workers under the leadership of Hüseyin Hilmi. Most labor activists were divided into separate organizations many of which had split from the TSP. In this context Numan called for the constitution of a new labor confederation that could centralize the administration of all labor syndicates and associations.<sup>19</sup> This suggestion was well received. The formation of the federation initiated by Numan was to a large extent complete by the end of January 1923. There were more than 15 different labor groups involved in founding of the Federation of Istanbul Worker Organizations (FIWO, İstanbul İşçi Teşkilatları Heyet-i Müttehidesi) (Dumont, 1997: 393).<sup>20</sup> Among them were the Association of Ottoman Typographers, the Association of Workers of Shipment and Unloading, the Association of Tram, Funicular and Electric Workers, the

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<sup>18</sup> The defeat of a tram workers' strike in February 1922 was decisive in the decline of TSP. For this strike movement, see, Serkan Tuna, "Dersaadet Tramvay Amelesi Grevi (26 Ocak-7 Şubat 1922)," *Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Dergisi* 33, no. 96: 69-112

<sup>19</sup> "Amele Mebusu Numan Usta'nın Konferansı," *İleri*, 22 December 1922, p. 2; "Numan Usta," *İleri*, 23 December 1922, p. 2

<sup>20</sup> According to the *Komintern* representative in Istanbul, there were 19 labor organizations, which had approximately 15,000 members, were involved in this enterprise. Mete Tunçay, *1923 Amele Birliği*, pp. 25-26



union of state-owned factory workers, the workers of Tobacco *Regie*, maritime workers, construction workers, dockers, the workers of Silahdarağa Power Plant and the workers of *Seyr-i Sefain* Factory.

After the October Revolution of 1917, a number of different communist groups had emerged in the capital.<sup>21</sup> Aside from bringing together the majority of the labor unions, the FIWO received the support of the communist groups operating in Istanbul. Many of them took part in the FIWO. Some of them had been directly connected with the Bolsheviks of Russia and some of them had had their origins in the socialist movements of the post-revolutionary days of the second constitutional period. In the course of the armistice period, such local groups consolidated their links with various labor groups here and there. Many of them supported and took part in the labor confederation initiated by Numan Usta.<sup>22</sup>

This initiative ended with a crack-down on the communist movement in May 1923 (Tunçay, 2009: 734-741). By that time the control of Istanbul had to a large extent passed to the Ankara government under Mustafa Kemal's helm, which had succeeded in defeating the Greek Army by September 1922. Although the Allied powers stayed in Istanbul until October 1923, the administration of the city had been gradually taken over by the Ankara government. The operation against the communist cadres occurred in this context, soon after the May Day of 1923. Many of the communist leaders were arrested allegedly because of a leaflet criticizing the ruling party of the Ankara regime for defending the interests of the privileged classes.

The crack down on the communist cadres brought about two important results. First, it confirmed that the communist movement would remain illegal under the new regime. Second, the FIWO ceased activity after the arrest of the communist cadres who formed the driving force of this enterprise. The disintegration of the FIWO should be

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<sup>21</sup> For the communist groups operating in Istanbul, see Erden Akbulut and Mete Tunçay. *İstanbul Komünist Grubu'ndan (Aydınlık Çevresi) Türkiye Komünist Partisi'ne 1919-1926-1. Cilt 1 1919-1923*. Vol. 1. (İstanbul: TÜSTAV Yayınları, 2012). See also, Erden Akbulut and Mete Tunçay. *Beynelmilel İşçiler İttihadı (Mütareke İstanbulu'nda Rum Ağırlıklı Bir İşçi Örgütü ve TKP ile İlişkileri)*. (İstanbul: TÜSTAV Yayınları, 2009)

<sup>22</sup> The leader of the Istanbul Communist Group and one of the prominent figures of the attempts to reorganize the Turkish Communist Party, Şefik Hüsni (Deymer) was involved in the FIWO's headquarters. So was Kazım of Van, another communist figure involved in the International Union of Workers. "Amele Cemiyetleri İttihadı," *Vakit*, 18 January 1922, p. 2.

considered a crucial turning point and a critical juncture for the development of relations between the Turkish ruling circles and the labor movement. That confederation represented an attempt on the part of a faction of the Turkish national movement to establish ties with and get the support of the existing leadership of the unions. It appears that this faction was the one subscribed to the aforementioned corporatist program called Representation of Professions. Yet, as it turned out, the influence of this circle and its corporatist program remained marginal within the national movement since the adoption of the Constitution of 1921 (*Teşkilat-ı Esasiye*). By May 1923, the Ankara government was dominated by an anti-communist circle that promoted ethno-religious homogeneity defined by a Turkish and Islamic heritage (Koralurk 2011). It was this circle that not only led the liquidation of the emerging communist movement but also refrained from building any form of alliance with organized labor in the years to come.

#### *A New State: Nationalism and Turkification*

The Republic of Turkey was proclaimed in October 1923. The former political cadres of CUP that initiated the establishment of this republican regime were associated with the People's Party, which would soon receive the name Republican People's Party (RPP). The new regime founded by the RPP was a national state in which the non-Muslim communities of the Ottoman Empire, particularly the Greek, Armenian, and Jewish communities, were given minority status based on the provisions of the Lausanne Treaty, signed on 24 July 1923.

Mustafa Kemal's understanding of the nation—was “essentially anti-populist, a forward looking ideology that glorified the people (and the nation) only for what they could become in the future (civilized/western and homogenous” (Sozen 2010, 7), with a strong emphasis on the Turkish and Muslim components as the common denominator of this imagined community. Thus, nation-building efforts under a Kemalist program focused on getting rid of elements that did not fit this description (Sozen, 2010, 7), including minorities on the labor front. The new regime sought to further homogenize the nation with a population exchange agreement where more than one million Greek-Orthodox individuals were deported to Greece in exchange for a large group of Muslims and Turks (Clark, 2009). The final culmination of this

was enshrined in the 1924 constitution, where the definition of Turkish nation made a clear distinction between non-Muslims and Muslims with the addition of a qualifier “*yurttaslik itibariyle*” (based on citizenship) which was intended to signify that non-Muslims do not qualify as Turks that constituted the core (Dinckol and Isik 2015, 25).

One of the crucial developments that characterized the political and ideological atmosphere of early republican Turkey was the rise of Turkish economic nationalism. The nationalist policies of this period aimed to Turkify the economy with the exclusion of foreign nationals and non-Muslim Turkish subjects from the state bureaucracy, commercial and business activities, and many other professions. The expulsion of Christians from the labor force was one of the most important aspects of the Turkification process (Alexandris 1974: 106; Koraltürk, 2011: 229-275). The first push for the Turkification of the labor market came from the General Union of Workers (GUW) (Tunçay, 2009a).

The GUW initially participated in the efforts of forming a larger and broader labor confederation under the FIWO. Nonetheless, the dissolution of the latter allowed the GUW to rapidly grow after the May Day of 1923. By April 1924, it had become a nation-wide organization that had more than 7,000 members organized in 32 different labor associations (Tunçay, 2009a: 109). The establishment and growth of the GUW signified a transformation in the political orientation of the labor movement. Previously, the Turkish Socialist Party (TSP) has been the driving force of the labor mobilization until the early months of 1922. The TSP organized collective labor actions with exclusive attention to economic matters, so it did not attempt to purge Christian workers from the labor force. In fact, there were many non-Muslims who figured among the TSP’s leading members and labor activists.<sup>23</sup> Unlike the TSP, the GUW sought to politicize the ethno-religious differences of the workers by launching an anti-Christian and xenophobic agitation among the Muslim workers. Hence the collective movements of the Muslim workers took a nationalist character under the control of the GUW.

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<sup>23</sup> There were 8 non-Muslims among the 22 tram, tunnel, and electric workers who were fired because of their involvement in the TSP and the tram strike of January–February 1922. Mete Tunçay, *1923 Amele Birliği* (Istanbul: Sosyal Tarih Yayınları, 2009), 20.

However, the Turkish government shut down the GUW by the middle of 1924. We have very little evidence on the primary motivation behind this decision of the RPP government. It is very likely that the RPP leaders did not want an autonomous labor confederation despite its nationalist orientation—especially during the first years of state-building in a politically unstable environment. At the same time, such an alliance was neither necessary nor desirable from a political perspective: the legitimacy of the RPP leadership did not rest on labor’s endorsement under a one-party rule in the absence of a genuine partisan competition.

Importantly, Turkification policies did not cease after the GUW’s closure. In addition to the population exchange agreement with Greece, the elimination of the workers of different nationalities was often regulated by contracts signed between the foreign companies and the Turkish government. On the other hand, the purge of the non-Muslim workers of Turkish nationality, who had come to be perceived as foreigners in the course of transition to the national rule, did not have a solid legal basis (Koraltürk, 2011: 229). They often lost their jobs due to the pressure exerted directly by the government. Hence the major economic centers of Turkey, such as Istanbul and İzmir, witnessed the expulsion of foreigners and non-Muslims minorities from the labor force in the 1920s and afterwards (Aktar, 2001).

We can observe the results of Turkish economic nationalism by looking at the latest data on the ethno-religious composition of the labor force in Istanbul. Although we lack comprehensive figures that is representative of the entire country, the composition of the labor force in major economic sectors reveal a gradual decline of the non-Muslim workers. For example, Koralturk (2011) finds that the share of Muslim workers employed in East Railway company have increased—within less than a year—from %75 in July 1923 to 91.4% in February 1924. (Koralturk 2011, 240-241). A similar increase is observed in Istanbul Port Workers: between August 1924 and February 1928, the share of Muslim workers has moved from 74% to 86% while non-Muslims declined from 15% to 8% (Koralturk 2011, 240-241). The composition of the utilities firm that supplied electricity to the city also exhibits a similar pattern: between 1923 and 1924, the share of Muslim workers increased quite substantially—from 41% to 78%—while the share of non-Muslim workers drastically decreased (See Table 1). Istanbul water utilities company experienced a similar change: between October 1924

and February 1926, the share of Muslim workers went up from 72% to 93% while non-Muslims were completely eliminated, declining from 11% to 0 within the same period (Koraltürk 2011, 242).

Electric Employees in 1923 and 1924 <sup>24</sup>								
Date	Muslim		Non-Muslim		Foreigner		Total	
1 May 1923	235	41%	234	41%	103	18%	572	100%
1 Jan 1924	432	73.5%	101	17%	56	9.5%	589	100%
5 Oct 1924	422	78%	76	14%	43	8%	541	100%

Table 1. Workers employed in the electricity company, data from Koraltürk 2011, 241.

Our findings based on new data on Tram worker company archives further reveal that this change is not limited to these sectors only. As Table 2 reveals below, between January 1924 and August 1925, the share of Muslim tram company workers went up from 85.6% to 94.1%, while total number of non-Muslims declined from 11.7% to 7.7%.

<sup>24</sup> Basbakanlık Cumhuriyet Arşivi (BCA), 230.88.15.10, 26/05/1339, 1-2 ; BCA, 230.27.21.8, 07/09/1924; Murat Koraltürk, *Erken Cumhuriyet Döneminde Ekonominin Türkleştirilmesi*, 241.

Tramway Company Employees <sup>25</sup>												
January 1924			September 1924			December 1924			August 1925			
	Waged	Salaried	Total	Wage d	Salaried	Total	Wage d	Salarie d	Total	Wage d	Salarie d	Total
Muslim	1414	95	1509	1421	92	1513	1433	90	1523	1454	90	1544
	90%	50%	85.6%	91.8%	52%	87.7 %	92.5%	52%	88.4%	94.1%	54.2%	94.1%
Non-Muslim	142	66	208	110	56	166	101	55	156	83	50	133
	9%	34.8%	11.7%	7.1%	31.6%	9.6%	6.5%	32%	9.06%	5.4%	30.2%	7.7%
Foreigner	18	29	47	16	29	35	15	28	43	9	26	35
	1%	15.2%	2.7%	1.1%	16.4%	2.7%	1%	16%	2.34%	0.5%	10.6%	2%
Total	1574	190	1764	1547	177	1724	1549	173	1722	1546	166	1712
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

### *The Aftermath: Etatism and Labor*

By the mid-1920s, the political incorporation of organized labor through a political party was a failed project. Following the GUWs closure, the one-party regime at power provided industrial labor with some degree of social security and relatively better working conditions compared to the earlier periods. Meanwhile, the rise of Turkish economic nationalism resulted in the further division of workers along ethnic and religious lines. A substantial part of the non-Muslim workers lost their jobs due to the

<sup>25</sup> Source: Basbakanlik Cumhuriyet Arsivi BCA, 230.89.18.2, 24/03/1925.

Turkification policies elsewhere following the population exchange, and a great number of Greek and Armenian workers left Istanbul (Koral Turk 2011, Ülker, 2017). All this meant that one of the most activist segments of the working population was removed from the labor force.

Further evidence suggests that the RPP sought to control labor activism after the GUV was shut down. Initially, the party backed the establishment of a new federation of labor unions (Society for the Elevation of the Labor of Turkey (SEL – Türkiye Amele Teali Cemiyeti) and had representatives in its central administration (Malkoç, 2015: 37-43). However, this attempt didn't last long either. In February 1925, the Seyh Sait Rebellion broke out in the Kurdish populated areas of southeastern Turkey. Thereafter the government declared martial law and silenced political opposition. Although it supported the government's measures to suppress the rebellion, the SEL could not avoid a crackdown in this rigid political context (Çelik, 2010: 78-79) and the federation was shut down by the government in 1928 (Malkoç, 2015: 43-46). The government suppressed all kinds labor activism in parallel with the gradual consolidation of the RPP's authoritarian one-party regime. The organized labor movement which re-emerged in the armistice period had almost completely disappeared.

As a result of these policies, the labor movement gradually lost its capacity to become an autonomous social actor during this period. The political incorporation of labor was interrupted during the post 1925 era and any attempt to mobilize and organize was repressed since the political cost of an alliance with unions that wanted to retain some of their autonomy seemed rather risky. Twenty years later, as Perón seized power in 1946 by rallying the support of organized workers in Argentina, labor activists in Turkey were still struggling to establish independent unions (Çelik, 2010: 85-112). This movement in 1946 also lost its momentum and the labor movement in Turkey remained rather docile.

In sum, the repression of Turkish labor during the early republican era under an exclusionary nation-building agenda eliminated the likelihood of a party-led incorporation in later stages and opened the path to a state-led incorporation. In 1950, the opposition party—Democrat Party, DP—won the 1950 elections and the relatively liberal atmosphere of this transition allowed workers to establish trade unions, a process

that was culminated in the formation of the labor confederation TÜRK-İŞ in 1952. While DP allowed TÜRK-İŞ to organize and recruit many rank-and-file members during the 1950s, these unions were allowed to expand their operations so long as they stayed within the limits set by the government (Çelik, 2010: 239-270). DP chose to uphold the trade-union law adopted in 1947, which strictly forbade the involvement of labor organizations in politics. In such an environment, TÜRK-İŞ leaders subscribed to the official line and rarely challenged the status-quo.

## **Conclusion**

Unlike in Latin America, the dominance of an exclusionary nation-building agenda during the late Ottoman and early republican period explains why a populist movement seeking to mobilize workers and incorporate the organized labor did not emerge in Turkey. This is because the ruling political party was hesitant to form an alliance given the lack of congruence between labor unions' membership composition, their demand for autonomy and the ideological orientation of the rulers. While some union leaders indeed had a partisan link with the RPP, this did not translate into a broader alliance between union confederations and the party during the formative years of the new republic. In the absence of a major threat from a landed oligarchy, the RPP leaders faced multiple challenges to their rule—as exemplified in Seyh Sait Rebellion—and hardened their exclusionary stance in response. This led to an acceleration in the homogenizing tendencies in the economic domain in favor of the Muslim constituency at the expense of non-Muslims. As a result of these repressive policies, the workers in Turkey did not experience a party-led political incorporation.

These early experiences of labor unions form a critical juncture, paving the way to a state-led incorporation path with long-lasting political consequences. Despite the rising number of labor unions and intensification of strike movements in the 1960s and 70s, the Turkish labor was, by and large, on the defensive and did not have a major clout in the legislative or the executive branch. The coup of 27 May 1960, which put an end to the DP rule, started a new period in the history of labor activism in Turkey. In 1967, DİSK was formed as a more militant labor confederation as opposed to this pro-state confederation (TÜRK-İŞ). Still, the links between the unions and the RPP—which had experienced a left turn by then—remained weak. In this



context, the most militant labor movements focused on defending their rights to strike and unionize, as exemplified in the 15-16 June uprisings of 1970. By the end of the 1970s, the Turkish labor movement remained outside formal channels of political influence and could not establish itself as a prominent political actor even when militant unions were quite active. By the end of the decade, the 1980 military coup brutally repressed unions once and for all as many activists were arrested and others were tortured.

The political influence of Turkish labor unions has been on a downhill track since the country's most recent transition to democracy. First, the political atmosphere remained hostile to labor when Turgut Ozal arrived in office of the Prime Minister with his center-right political party, Motherland Party (ANAP), in 1983. Though the military generals did not initially support Ozal, the new Prime Minister did not face a major opposition thanks to his pro-market stance and appeasement policy towards the military. During his five years in office, former unions organized under DİSK remained banned while pro-government TÜRK-İŞ actively continued to recruit rank and file members. However, TÜRK-İŞ leadership cadres had no strong ties with ANAP leaders and the government preferred to keep unions at an arms-length rather than incorporating them into decision-making processes. While the left-wing opposition led by the Social Democrat People Party (SHP) appeared to be the most likely candidate to enter into a political alliance with labor, the party leadership also did not have any union leaders as candidates on their list. This lack of interest in allying with labor unions remained the same in the second half of the 1990s when the SHP leadership decided to join RPP. Eventually, the picture deteriorated for the worse when Justice and Development Party (AKP) emerged on the scene in 2002. Between 2002 and 2013, labor union density in Turkey witnessed its sharpest decline and unions were drastically marginalized. As the AKP government under Erdogan's rule took an anti-democratic turn, there was no powerful labor confederation to stand in the party's way to resist executive's increasing hold on the legislative and the judicial branches of the government.

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