

Turkey: twelve days that posed the question of workers autonomy

“We long thought that given the weakness of labour unions, there would be low likelihood of work stoppages”

Ege Seçkin, analyst at IHS Consulting.

The workers revolt against the scab trade-union Türk Metal, which was supposed to represent them, has, against the bosses' expectations, contributed to the strike movement which brought the whole automotive industry to a standstill for two weeks. In spite of the rapid growth of the sector, which received a lot of money from European car makers, workers are still paid low wages compared to European workers, and working conditions are among the harshest in Europe. Nothing seemed to be able to remove the union as the only representative of the workers, with its ties to the state and companies in the sector.

The worker's spring in the Turkish automotive industry

Premises

Mid-December 2014

Bosch workers get a wage increase of 60%, far greater than the few percent obtained by other employees in the automotive industry. The wage agreements are binding on employees until August 2017.

A three-year agreement has been signed between the employers' association of metallurgy and the Türk Metal union. Wage increases are low, far from the 60% granted by Bosch. In order to negotiate a three year agreement, the MESS (*Türkiye Metal Sanayicileri Sendikası*, employers' association of metallurgy), accepted a wage increase of 9.78% for the first six months of the contract. This three-year contract is unfavourable to workers, because inflation is still high in Turkey. This increase is mainly favourable to employees with more seniority. Depending on the factory, up to 60% of workers are new hires that have wages half those of their colleagues.

29 January 2015

Following a call from Birlesik Metal union (member of DISK) there are about 15,000 striking workers employed in 42 metallurgy companies. They protest against the agreement signed by Türk Metal. Major companies, including subsidiaries of large groups such as Alstom, Schneider and Bekaert break with their employers' association (MESS) to sign bilateral agreements with workers' representatives of their companies. The next day, the government issued a decree to suspend the strike and businesses enforce two days off to calm the situation.

14 April

Angry protests with rallies affect all major automotive plants in the province of Bursa. At Oyak-Renault, there are 14 delegates elected by their fellow workers who want to negotiate with the management. The company decides to sack them. Immediately, there are protests in the factory and the workers down tools. Sanctions against the delegates are lifted. Türk Metal sends thugs to attack a group of workers.

26 April

Thousands workers from Oyak-Renault and equipment manufacturers such as Mako and Coşkunöz demonstrate in the city centre of Bursa for wage increases. They threaten to resign *en masse* from Türk Metal if the union does not support their demands.

A multi-factory committee is created. Its main demands are:

- Cancellation of the agreement signed by the union and replacement by a new one on the basis of the agreement reached at Bosch.
- The workers will elect their own representatives.
- There will be no punishment for workers who leave Türk Metal union.
- Türk Metal must immediately abandon its premises inside the factories.

May

5 May

Oyak-Renault factory workers hold a mass meeting at the factory's front gate to collectively resign from their membership of Türk Metal. A group of thugs belonging to the union attacks workers and injures several of them.

The factory management lays off more workers. Thousands of Tofaş workers and other contractors also leave Türk Metal which they call a "sell-out union".

6 May

Oyak-Renault night shift workers stop work and the morning shift refuses to start working. Workers of Coşkunöz and Mako equipment suppliers join them in solidarity. Finally, Renault's management decides to cancel the layoffs and announces that employees are free to leave Türk Metal. They also commit to ask the Renault management in France for permission to raise salaries within two weeks.

14 May

Renault-France management says that, ultimately, there will be no salary increases. Thousands of workers down tools and sit all night outside the gates of the factory. They are joined by workers from other companies.

15 May

Tofaş Workers down tools and join the movement. Their strike will continue until May 18. "*The strike is illegal*" said Oyak-Renault, saying that a three-year contract had just been signed with the union. No less than 40% of car production in Turkey is at a standstill.

17 May

Oyak-Renault management ask the strikers to leave the factory. They refuse. Pevrul Kavlak, leader of Türk Metal union, who has lost 10,000 members in a few days, asks the strikers to go back to work. He says that the strike is illegal and that companies can dismiss strikers without compensation.

18 May

About 800 of the 1,070 workers at the supplier Mako gather outside the factory in the morning, while 120 others refuse to leave the factory. Their three demands are: same wage increase as that obtained at Bosch; no dismissals following the strike; withdrawal from the factory of the Türk Metal union. Workers from suppliers Coşkunöz, Valeo, Delphi,

Ficosa, Yazaki, Leoni, Beltan Trelleborg Vibracoustic (TBVC), SKT, Ototrim Automotive and DJC, all located in Bursa, join the strike. There are now more than 15,000 strikers.

The CEO of Tofaş, Cengiz Eroldu, came to explain to the strikers that he is bound by the collective agreement and that wages cannot be increased until August 2017.

19 May

Due to the lack of parts, the effect of strikes on equipment manufacturers and the unrest existing in its plants, Ford Otosan stopped production of its two units and also Yeniköy in Gölcük, Kocaeli province, 100km north east of Bursa. 500 workers demonstrated outside the gates of the factory in Gölcük, expressing their solidarity with the strikers and with similar demands. The strike now affects most plants in the sector. Turkish ministers now intervene to resolve such a major conflict close to the parliamentary elections of 7 June. Employers' associations point out that the movement has stopped exports. Türk Metal says that the wage increase at Bosch corresponds to a catch up for the workers who had not received wage increases for 38 months. They point out that wages at Bosch are still below those at Oyak-Renault and Tofaş.

20 May

Workers at the historic TürkTraktör tractor factory, also owned by Koç Holding, go on strike in their turn. This factory is located in Adapazarı in Ankara province, in Central Turkey.

Oyak-Renault, which has asked the government to negotiate with the strikers, says that hundreds of them are occupying its factory. The same situation happens at Fiat, where the strikers stay near the machines. Ford welcomes the government's intervention to resolve the conflict.

21 May

Renault-France management threatens to stop investing in Turkey.

Tofaş and Coşkunöz employees return to work. The Minister of Industry calls for the strike to end.

500 workers demonstrate at the factory in Gölcük.

22 May

Production resumes at Tofaş and Ford. An agreement is concluded between the management and strikers' representatives around several points: no victimisation, freedom to choose a union, a bonus of 1,000 lira (about \$US380), a half month's salary, to resume work, and the opening of negotiations to

increase the income of employees through higher quality and productivity.

23 May

Oyak-Renault agrees not to sue the strikers. The company offers a bonus of \$US370 for workers to return to work on 25 May. While an agreement is reached with Ford and Tofaş, Oyak-Renault workers refuse to suspend the strike.

25 May

About 600 workers of the Ford plant in Gölcük refuse to return to work. At the same time, Ford Otosan announces that another plant in İnönü, in Eskişehir province, has stopped work. Not only are supply parts for the factory missing, but, most importantly, Ford took this action because some workers had started to strike.

Return to work

27 May

Workers return to work at Oyak-Renault. An agreement is signed which grants similar conditions for resumption of work to those obtained in other companies in the sector. Employees will receive a back-to-work bonus of 1,000 lira (about \$US380) and a monthly bonus of 600 lira, based on the quality and quantity of production. Management is committed not to engage in victimisation of strikers. It is this last point which made previous negotiations fail and prompted the continuation of the strike.

3 June

Ford management announces resumption of work at İnönü plant.

8 June

Two of the strike leaders are sacked by Tofaş. Workers gather outside the gates of the factory, business activity is again brought to a standstill.

20 June

Strike at Er Metal, an automotive subcontractor in Bursa. The management had not kept its promises after a first strike which took place at the same time as those of other industry plants. This time, management is committed to 10% wage increases, as well as further increases of various bonuses. This

struggle, like the previous ones, is not organized by a union.

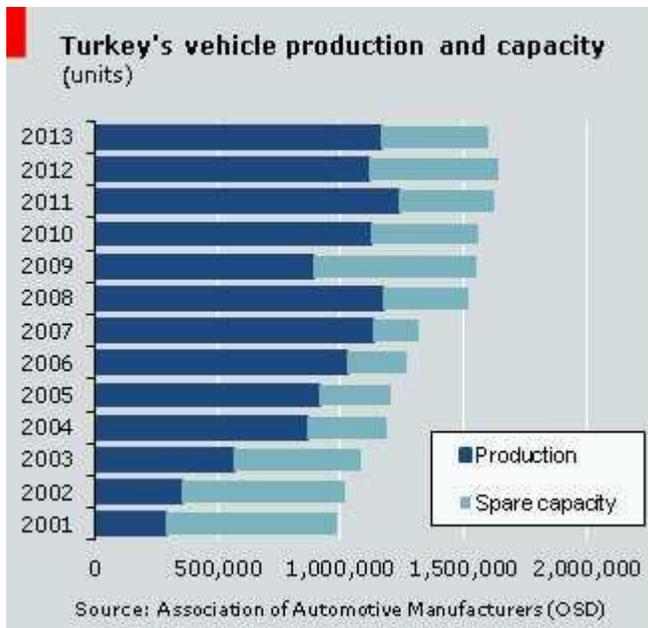
Turkish automotive industry

The fifth largest European producer, Turkey produced 1.17 million cars and commercial vehicles in 2014, that is to say 4% more than the previous year. In 2002, its production did not exceed 346,565 vehicles. The automotive industry started in 1969 at Oyak-Renault. It grew rapidly in the 2000s to make the country a major exporter. Four-fifths of its production was exported in 2014, mainly to Western European countries - France, Germany and Italy (in order of volume). The automotive sector generated revenues of \$22.3 billion last year, an increase year on year of 7%. Turkey's GDP is \$800 billion. This sector provides one sixth of the country's exports. And investments continue to flow. Toyota will invest \$500 million to increase its capacity by half, to 250,000 vehicles. Tofaş-Fiat will invest \$520 million to add two new models to its production line.

Ford has been present in Turkey since 1977. Its joint venture with a local conglomerate Koç Holding (a family group, one of the largest in the country), Ford Otosan, employs approximately 7,500. Built in 1971, the Oyak-Renault plant has a production capacity of 360,000 vehicles and 450,000 engines per year, with more than 5,000 workers. In 2014, no more than 19% of its products were intended for the local market, the other 81% were exported. It is owned in partnership with the pension fund of the Turkish army. Tofaş, a joint venture between Fiat and the Koç conglomerate, is the third largest producer in Turkey. In addition to Fiat, the company also built models for other brands such as Peugeot, Citroën, Opel and Vauxhall.

Between them, these three companies account for nearly \$10 billion of exports. Oyak-Renault is the third largest exporter in Turkey, Fiat the seventh.

In the domestic market, registrations fell sharply, by around 20% in 2014, under the combined effect of rising interest rates, increased sales taxes, depreciation of the Turkish lira and inflation.



At least 40% of workers work more than 50 hours a week and Turkey has the highest rate of fatal incidents in the industry in Europe and the third worldwide. This situation delights the country's leaders. Recep Erdoğan, the Turkish president, boasts that his country has become "*the China of Europe*".

Unions in Turkey

According to the OECD, Turkey's unionisation rate is the lowest of the OECD countries, and it went from 10% in 2000 to 4.5% today. The power of the official union confederation - Türk-İş - is down to the banning of other trade unions in 1980 by the CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, Republican People's Party), the historical Kemalist party linked to the army, and an almost obligatory membership system so that this confederation founded in 1952, claims 1.75 million members. Member of Türk-İş, Türk Metal is the largest union representing workers in the auto industry. It has 180,000 members, including 50,000 in Bursa.

With more than 300,000 members, the DİSK, the Revolutionary Workers Union Confederation, was founded in 1967 following a split from Türk-İş. Despite repression the number of members has risen to 600,000. Banned in 1980 it became legal again in 1992.

HAK-İŞ, confederation close to the AKP also claims more than 300,000 members, as does KESK, the union of public sector workers.

In 2012, following previous conflicts around the renewal of the collective agreement, the 6000 workers of the German supplier Bosch (the largest in the world) collectively left Türk Metal to join Birleşik Metal-İş ("United Metal Workers"), a union which is smaller but less tied to the state and the bosses, and a member of the DISK confederation. But after three years of trials and various forms of pressure, combined with layoffs, the united front of Judiciary-State-boss managed to restore the Türk Metal monopoly of workers' representation.

During the conflict, the lack of wage negotiations led to a wage freeze. Under pressure from the workers, the union obtained a substantial increase from the Bosch management to compensate for losses suffered during these three years. This 60% increase in their salaries (significant, but only in line with the high inflation rate in Turkey) which, however, remains slightly below those of Renault and other major sectors, caused a chain reaction in other auto companies. After the increases, the hourly wage at Bosch is 9.46 against 9.83 lira at Oyak-Renault.

A brief sketch of workers' autonomy, quickly lost

The date on which the conflict started demonstrates that workers have a good understanding of the automotive industry – May 2015 being a good time to fight. After the recovery from the financial crisis of 2007-2008, between 2009 and 2014, the number of employees in the sector increased by 350%. The corresponding investments continue to rise, like those of Tofaş and Toyota. Fiat increases its production facilities in Turkey in order to export 175,000 Doblo cars to the US by 2021, while continuing to reduce its production capacity in Italy.

The proximity of the parliamentary elections scheduled for 7 June likely prompted the government not to interfere too brutally in the conflict. For their part, the workers were careful not to "politicize" their movement. The main assault against the strikers was carried out by the Türk Metal union. When it tried to divide the younger, less well paid and more combative workers from the older workers, the union failed. The police did nothing more than monitor and supervise the movement because there were no clashes between the strikers, foremen and factory guards.

As during previous strikes in countries like China, where freedom of organization is very lim-

ited, the auto workers have used social networks, Facebook and Twitter, to exchange information and establish an embryonic organization. More traditionally, at Oyak-Renault, they have built a network of delegates by team, by workshop and by sector. It is these delegates who nominated their representatives to negotiate demands with management. The management was forced to recognize the fact that the union Türk Metal had no control over the strikers.

During the movement, the strikers massively stressed that their action had nothing to do with the coming general election. They accepted the visit of members of the opposition who came in solidarity with the struggle, but they asked them to stay in the Oyak-Renault car park, and to remove any political identification. This behaviour expresses both a legitimate mistrust of traditional political parties *and* the fear of divisions, in an area where so many workers vote for the ruling AKP¹, and thus a reluctance to consider their fight as part of the struggle against exploitation and the state. They have also demonstrated “neutrality” subordinate to the state by not touching the Kurdish question².

On many occasions, the strikers showed their willingness to be “neutral” towards capitalist domination, even saying that they don’t have particular problems with Oyak-Renault, just with the Türk Metal union. In word as in deed, the strikers have never sought to take control of the factories, leaving control of the doors to the guards, and control of the workshops to the foremen. They even found excuses to scabs, explaining that they were in solidarity with the strikers but were afraid. At Oyak-Renault, it was

the decision of management to block access badges which resulted in a *de facto* occupation of the plant by 900 workers who remained by the machines because if they left they would not have been able to come back in again. Meanwhile, about 2,000 strikers occupied the carpark. And it was the management that supplied the strikers with food and drink for four days. The families then took over, climbing through the fences. With families and children playing, the Oyak-Renault carpark occupied by strikers does not look like a place to discuss and debate.

The physical and political confinement in which the strikers kept themselves, prompted by the forces of repression, are the limits of their struggle. If they kept away the representatives of political parties, it was not to preserve the autonomy of the workers but to keep a facade of unity among workers more or less religious, more or less Republican, more or less nationalist.

The interview with a worker from Tofaş³ confirms the strengths and limitations of the struggle. He recalled that working conditions had become more severe with longer and longer working hours – conditions that prevent workers from making contact with each other. Previously the working conditions in this type of business were somewhat better than in other sectors. On learning about the signing of the agreement between Türk Metal and the employers association that they considered unfavourable, the surprised Tofaş workers went to the union headquarters to ask for an explanation.

The strike started after the union turned them away. According to this worker the movement was led by a group of 45 militant workers without any solid organization, and the contract renewal that occurred at the same time for everybody allowed a common struggle. Coordination between the factories and companies played a secondary role in the convergence of actions. He concluded that at last he understood from the struggle that it is the unity of the workers, rather than the presence of a union, which is their best defence.

As a result, the unrest in the Turkish automotive demonstrated the vitality of the working class which is still growing in the world, its readiness to wage struggles and its determination to fight the state unions when they are being too complacent with the company. In this, the Turkish strike looks like many others, in China for wages and better working conditions, in South African mines and

¹ Results of general elections on June will show that, in Bursa region, a stronghold of the AKP, votes lost from AKP were transferred to the Kemalist party as well as the far-right MHP, which has the “Grey Wolves” as its armed wing. HDP, coming from pro-Kurd movement, and rather Left-wing, will only gain less than 6% of votes.

² As Marx wrote (see: “Letter to Kugelmann”, on November 29th 1869): “I have become more and more convinced—and it is only a question of driving this conviction home to the English working class — that it can never do anything decisive here in England until it separates its policy with regard to Ireland most definitely from the policy of the ruling classes, until it not only makes common cause with the Irish but even takes the initiative in dissolving the Union established in 1801 and replacing it by a free federal relationship. And this must be done, not as a matter of sympathy with Ireland but as a demand made in the interests of the English proletariat. If not, the English people will remain tied to the leading-strings of the ruling classes, because it will have to join with them in a common front against Ireland. Every one of its movements in England itself is crippled by the strife with the Irish, who form a very important section of the working class in England.”

³ Published on 15 May 2015, on Emek ve Adalet (“labour and justice”): <http://www.emekveadalet.org/>

textile factories in Bangladesh for the same reasons and in many other so-called emerging countries. Those sections of the working class develop their own aims and their combat capabilities. This process is slow and is following an admittedly uneven course, but is certainly there. Workers' autonomy shows its face insistently and with remarkable regularity.

Not to see this you need to be blind or worse, to continue to see the countries where this autonomy stammers as the periphery of capital, or as "backward" (take a look at the above graph about the Turkish automotive sector). Some might see them as countries that are only capable of generating national liberation struggles whose time is definitely gone forever. The only thing backward about these countries is their mechanisms for integrating the proletariat into the state (what we call social democracy) and the organization of intermediary bodies (parties, unions, associations of civil society, etc.). The bourgeois camp explains these workers' revolts by the ill-functioning of the State, and treats them as a conflictual process that can bring about the modernisation and effectiveness of social democracy. This reading has a basis in reality, but fails to identify in these struggles elements of continuity with the previous highs of the proletarian cycle that was defeated in 1980.

The thread that connects these high points is precisely the embryonic expression of workers' autonomy, the use of workers' force (which is not simply the use of violence) across the multiple barriers put in place by capital. This force deployed even for short periods as in Turkey is an ephemeral materialization of workers' power. It is a restrained force, limited by the will of the struggling workers themselves, as in Turkey, and waiting to unfold. It has valuable practical lessons for proletarians who can recognize what it could achieve if it managed to shatter, in the fight, the straightjacket of the dominant ideas

Unfortunately this path has not been taken during the strike in the Turkish automobile sector. The strike thus did not trigger the dynamics of workers' autonomy. *Formally* independent of the unions and parties of capital, it has not been so in its substance. The strikers kept an ambiguous attitude towards the company, whose command was never challenged by offensive forms of struggle such as strike pickets, marches through workshops, chasing

out the cops of the plant that are the guards, the scabs and the foremen. This is the main limitation of the movement. The refusal of any "politicization" resulted in the inability of the strikers to start collectively elaborating another vision of the world, that is to say another vision of the relations of production and reproduction and their place as workers in capitalist society.

Wanting to be strictly "economic", the movement has certainly avoided splitting it prematurely according to divisions based on the political convictions and beliefs of its participants but, in the longer term, it did not help to forge a new collective consciousness for strikers, to achieve workers autonomy concretely, emancipation in and through the struggle from the dominant ideas. Under pressure of these ideas, it would stand out from "leftists" of Gezi. Last struggles carried out together with the students, the women... were defeated during the 80's. As soon as wage objectives were achieved, and the most rotten union dismissed, work has resumed normally in the Turkish auto plants. The workers' power expressed by the struggle has not resulted, for now, in a sustainable shift in the balance of power in favour of the strikers inside workshops in the course of the working day.

For revolutionary proletarians the world over the Turkish lesson is no less precious. In short, it helps give concrete meaning to the concept of workers autonomy and we can distinguish using this example how an autonomous strike differs from the general political project of workers' autonomy and from the reconquest by the exploited and oppressed of their political independence. Finally, it enables them to understand that the road to workers' autonomy is not simply marked out by successive autonomous strikes but requires considerable organizational effort and can only be travelled by means of an intransigent political struggle waged by the most conscious worker minorities in order to overcome the purely "economic" and defensive dimension of the struggle.

And it should also remind us that for workers facing a global capital there can be no national solutions, and that workers "from here" can only support workers "over there" on the basis that each victory "over there" is a victory "here", as much as each defeat "over there" is a defeat "here".