

Teachers In Action: Private Sector Teachers' Union (2021-2025)

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The intellectual content of this thesis, which has been written by me and for which I take full responsibility, is my own, original work, and it has not been previously or concurrently submitted elsewhere for any other examination or degree of higher education. The sources of all paraphrased and quoted materials, concepts, and ideas are fully cited, and the admissible contributions and assistance of others with respect to the conception of the work as well as to linguistic expression are explicitly acknowledged herein.



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Abstract

Teachers In Action: Private Sector Teachers' Union (2021-2025)

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Associate Professor Irmak Ertör, Thesis Advisor

This thesis examines the emergence, strategies, and transformative effects of the Private Sector Teachers' Union (PSTU) in Turkey's private education sector between 2021 and 2025. It argues that sectoral conditions—deregulation and precarization—both constrained and enabled militant, innovative unionism. In the absence of enforceable collective bargaining, PSTU assembled a disruptive, public-facing repertoire: school-front protests, sit-ins and social-media campaigning. Through worker-to-worker organizing, the union scaled rapidly up across sector. Findings show multi-level transformations that I analyze at three levels: individual, organizational and sectoral. Individually, teachers developed confidence, solidarity, and durable collective efficacy through PSTU's mobilization. Organizationally, PSTU expanded and got more consolidated but also experienced a process of institutionalization, risking strategic flexibility. Sectorally, the union heightened public awareness regarding the precarity of teachers, and compelled some re-regulatory moves. This study uses Burawoy's extended case method, in-depth interviews, and participant observation to locate everyday organizing practices within broader political-economic dynamics, and conceptually, Hyman's strategic triangle and Blanc's worker-to-worker organizing model. Overall, the thesis contributes to labor revitalization debates by showing that, even under authoritarian neoliberalism, grassroots and independent unions can innovate, mobilize, and reshape the terrain of labor politics.

70,000 words

Özet

Öğretmenler Eylemde: Türkiye’deki Özel Sektör Öğretmenleri Sendikası
(2021-2025)

Muhammed Gazali Kılınç, Yüksek Lisans Adayı, 2025

Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Atatürk İlkeleri ve İnkılap Tarihi Enstitüsü

Doçent Irmak Ertör, Tez Danışmanı

Bu tez Özel Sektör Öğretmenleri Sendikası’nın kuruluşunu, stratejilerini ve dönüştürücü etkilerini incelemektedir. Tez, özel eğitim sektörünün yapısal koşullarının—deregülasyon ve güvencesizleştirme—hem sendikal imkanları kısıtladığını hem de öğretmenleri militant işçi aktivizmine ve yenilikçiliğe mecbur bıraktığını savunmaktadır. Toplu sözleşmenin fiilen imkansız olduğu koşullarda Özel Sektör Öğretmenleri Sendikası, okul önü protestoları, meclis nöbetleri ve sosyal medya kampanyalarıyla güçlü bir eylemsellik ortaya koymuştur. İşçiden işçiye örgütlenerek sendika kısa sürede hızla büyümüş ve stratejilerini öğretmenlere aşlamıştır. Araştırmanın bulguları bu sendikanın mücadelesi sonucunda bireysel, organizasyonel ve sektörel dönüşümlere işaret etmektedir. Bireysel düzeyde öğretmenler sendika eylemliliği etrafında özgüven, dayanışma ve kalıcı bir kolektif etkinlik duygusu geliştirmiştir. Örgütsel düzeyde sendika, stratejik esnekliği riske atacak biçimde bir kurumsallaşma sürecinden geçmiştir. Sektörel düzeyde ise sendika deregülasyonu tersine çevirme yönünde sektörde mütevazı bir yeniden-düzenleme hamlesine sebep olmuştur. Bu çalışma gündelik örgütlü pratikleri daha geniş siyasal-ekonomik dinamikler içinde konumlandırmak için Burawoy’un genişletilmiş vaka yöntemini ve derinlemesine görüşmeler ile katılımcı gözlem yöntemlerini, kavramsal olarak ise Hyman’ın stratejik üçgenini ve Blanc’ın işçiden işçiye örgütlenme modelini kullanmaktadır. Genel olarak tez, otoriter neoliberalizm koşullarında dahi bağımsız sendikaların yenilikçi yöntemler geliştirebileceğini ve mobilize

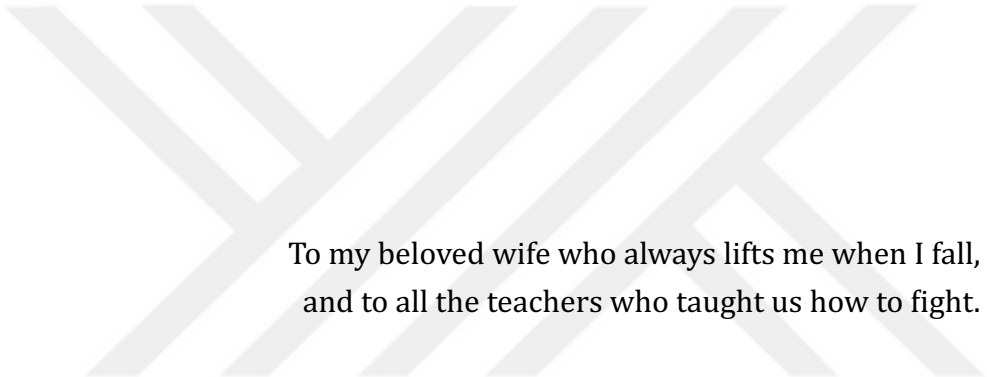
olabileceğini ortaya koyarak emek çalışmaları literatüründeki sendikal canlanma tartışmalarına katkı sunmaktadır.

70.000 kelime





TEACHERS IN ACTION



To my beloved wife who always lifts me when I fall,
and to all the teachers who taught us how to fight.



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Abbreviations and Acronyms

CCIIE	Coordination Council for the Improvement of the Investment Environment
CHP	Republican People's Party
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
CSWA	Chinese Staff and Workers' Association
CTU	Chicago Teachers Union
CUP	Committee of Union and Progress
CUT	Central Única dos Trabalhadores
DNA	Detroit Newspaper Agency
DP	Democrat Party
ECM	Extended Case Method
EPID	Export Promotion and Implementation Department
GATS	General Agreement on Trade in Services
HERE	Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union
ILR	School of Industrial and Labor Relations
ISI	Import Substitution Industrialization
KCTU	Korean Confederation of Trade Unions
MEB	Ministry of National Education (Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı)
MYK	Central Executive Committee (Merkez Yürütme Kurulu)
NES	National Employment Strategy
PSTU	Private Sector Teachers' Union
RILU	Red International of Labor Unions
SMU	Social Movement Unionism
TL	Turkish Lira
UFCW	United Food and Commercial Workers
UFR	United for Respect
WERN	Worker Empowerment Research Network

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NOTE: The in-house editor of the Atatürk Institute has made detailed recommendations with regard to the format, grammar, spelling, usage, syntax, and style of this thesis.





Introduction



August 30th was the first anniversary of our union's founding. We thought, what should we do for our first year? We could organize a big picnic, maybe a festival... In the end, we decided to hold an indoor event—something to celebrate the anniversary and talk about our demands. What was our main demand when we founded the union? The base salary demand. So, since we had all those people gathered, we thought, why not go to the Ministry of Education and make a statement about our right to a base salary?

So we gathered. Buses came in from different provinces. People brought cakes and pastries. We sang songs on the way. At the event, there were speeches and such, and then we gathered in the garden. The police said we couldn't march to the Ministry with slogans. We said okay, then let's go without slogans. Still, they said we couldn't go. Then they told us we could go to the Miners' Monument instead, so we said fine, let's go there. Then they said no, you can't go there either.

Now we're all gathered there with a demand, and one of the parties responsible is the Ministry. We want to speak up—they say no, you can't. We lined up, saying we're going to walk—they said you can't. We said we will walk—they said you can't. We decided to march. And as soon as we did, we were met with police violence. Pepper spray... Some friends who were affected fell back, and the ones who felt okay moved forward again. There were 400 people in that hall that day. We went forward, fell back, went forward, fell back. There was one round of arrests. If I'm not mistaken, six of our friends were taken. I didn't even see that part—I was in the back, trying to open my eyes. Then we started yelling, give us back our friends, what did you do to them, open the way—and there was a second round of arrests. I was among those taken the second time. ... Later, while we were still in custody, we realized we'd done something that became one of the most talked-about events in Turkey. Minister Soylu made a statement. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made a statement. Kılıçdaroğlu made a statement. And for the first time, the problems of private school teachers were being discussed on national TV.

– Dilan Teacher

The protest in which Dilan was detained by police violence took place on August 30, 2022, in Ankara, following a meeting celebrating the first anniversary of the Private Sector Teachers' Union (PSTU). The teachers wanted to hold a demonstration in front of the Ministry of National Education (MEB) to demand that the base salary rule be added to the Öğretmenlik Meslek Kanunu (Teachers' Profession Law, ÖMK) in order to

equalize the wages of private sector teachers with those of public sector teachers, but the police did not allow it. When the teachers, whose constitutional rights were being usurped by the police, tried to march towards the ministry to hold their demonstration despite the obstruction, the police intervened with pepper spray and detained the teachers by force. In the evening of the same day, the detained teachers were released, and there was a nationwide debate about how and why teachers, a respected profession in Turkey, were violently detained and the problems faced by private sector teachers. This protest was the first action that brought the newly formed, independent PSTU, still finding its path, into the country's spotlight, but it would not be the last.

Prior to PSTU, teachers in Turkey had not been in the spotlight with union actions for many years. The union experiences through which education workers gained various rights were consigned to the distant pages of history. It is not only teachers; the working class and trade unions in general have not been on the agenda in Turkish society for a long time, and they have had limited social influence. Worker resistance has declined, and the voice of the trade union struggle in society has lost its resonance. In this sense, PSTU's action represented an exception. An exception in terms of innovation in various respects of union struggle and the revitalization of the labor movement in Turkey.

The PSTU's actions came at the dawn of the workers' struggle's awakening from a long period of defeat. The neoliberal restructuring project of Turkey, implemented through the military coup and continued by authoritarian neoliberal governments of AKP, aimed at the crackdown on trade unions, the reduction of collective agreement scope and weakening of the power of trade unions. With this goal in mind, the labor regime has been made more flexible and precarious since the 1980s¹, and unions have been rendered ineffective by overly procedural regulations and

¹ A. Çelik, "Turkey's New Labour Regime Under the Justice and Development Party in the First Decade of the Twenty-First Century: Authoritarian Flexibilization," *Middle Eastern Studies* 51, no. 4 (2015): 618–35.

lengthy authorization processes². The corruption and inter-union competition that began in the 1990s within the confederations has been exploited by the AKP government to favor employers³. As a result, compromising unions have been granted organizational privileges in certain areas, while militant class unions have been blocked⁴. Under AKP's authoritarian neoliberalism⁵, especially during the period of increasing political pressure after 2010 both the number of general protests and specifically worker protests decreased, and many strikes were postponed⁶.

Despite the prolonged challenges faced by the trade union movement, there has been an increase in general labor actions since 2020 in Turkey (see Figure 1.1). The declining number of workplace-based actions since 2015 has risen notably starting in 2021. This resurgence includes substantial resistance across various sectors, with some worker groups achieving meaningful gains. Birelma, Işıklı, and Sert⁷ attribute the rise to worsening working conditions, high inflation, the AKP's electoral tolerance, and the emergence of militant trade unionism during strikes. In 2021, 39% of workers' resistance that had achievements production was either

² PTT-SEN, *PTT A.Ş. ve Alt İşverenler Bünyesinde Görülen İşlerde Toplu İş Sözleşmesi Akdetme Önündeki Engellere İlişkin Taslak Rapor* (PTT-SEN, 2023).

³ M.G. Doğan, *The Deradicalisation of Organised Labour*, ed. Turkey Reframed Eds İ. Akça et al. (London: Pluto, 2013).

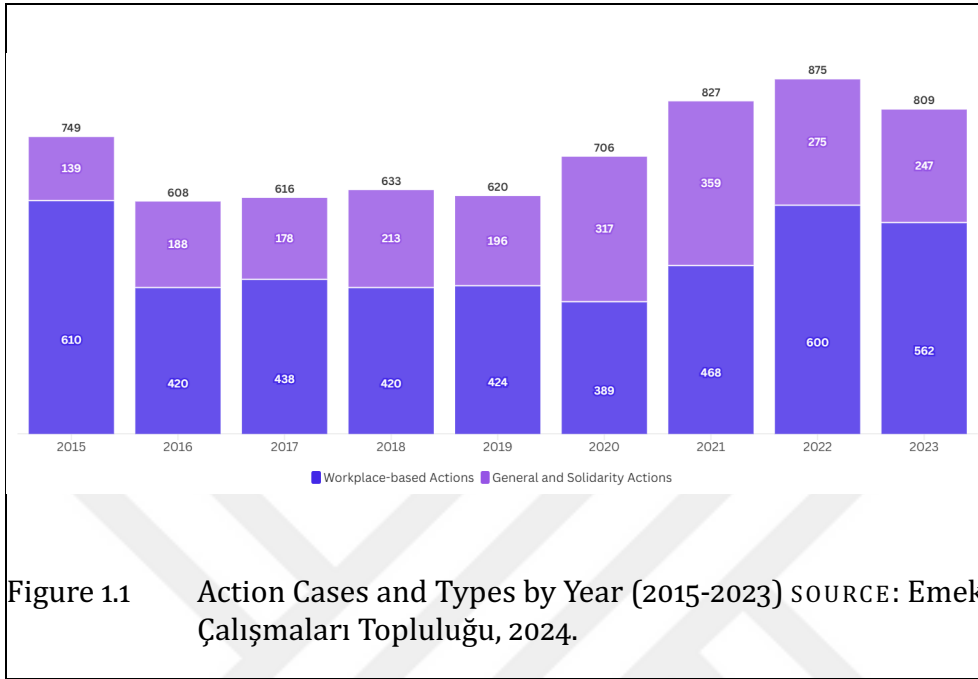
⁴ Çelik, "Turkey's New Labour Regime Under the Justice and Development Party in the First Decade of the Twenty-First Century: Authoritarian Flexibilization."

⁵ U. Akçay, "Revisiting the Rise and Decline of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: A Political Economy Analysis of AKP's Initial Decade," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 26, no. 6 (2024): 972-987;; A. Birelma, "Militant Minority at Work: A Successful Case of Unionisation of Garment Workers in Istanbul," *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue Canadienne d'études Du Développement* 44, no. 1 (2023): 113-130;; D. Özkiziltan, "Authoritarian Neoliberalism in AKP's Turkey: An Industrial Relations Perspective," *Industrial Relations Journal* 50, no. 3 (2019): 218-39; S. Bozkurt - Güngen, "Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities Under the AKP Governments in Turkey," *South European Society and Politics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 219-38.

⁶ Alpkan Birelma et al., "The Stubborn Persistence of Working-Class Protest in Turkey in an Age of Authoritarian Neoliberalism," *Turkish Studies* 25, no. 1 (2024): 64-91.

⁷ Ibid.

stopped or slowed down. That is, militant actions targeting production were stronger, more common and more effective in 2021⁸.



Unorganized grassroots workers and independent unions emerged prominently during the January-February surge of 2022 (for a lengthier assessment see section 2.4). Accordingly, more traditional, centralized, bureaucratic and confederative trade unionism is being replaced by a more innovative, decentralized, bottom-up, militant and independent trade union movement. The PSTU has thus begun its union struggle as part of this wave of revitalization. Indeed, as will be explained in Chapter 1, this trend is not unique to Turkey.

§ 1.1 Why Teachers?

It is wise to ask that why PSTU should be the example of militant rise in labor movement of Turkey instead of other sectors that traditionally related to militant union struggle. Yet, its answer is pretty simple: today in

⁸ Ibid.

Turkey and in the last decade around the globe, the most glamorous labor struggles were carried out by teachers and teacher unions. Especially in 2023, across 11 countries⁹, the most frequent strikes took place in education sectors¹⁰. Besides that, PSTU is increasing its share of general action cases in Turkey from 2021 to 2023¹¹.

Across the globe, different types of teachers' unions are decisive in education policies¹², especially for fight against increasing privatization of education¹³. In this sense, teachers' unions in different countries represent an important part, a complete example, of the trade union revitalization that is taking place in these countries. Teachers' unions seem to have adopted a more bottom-up and militant approach that challenges bureaucratic structures.

As instance, in 2012, Chicago, approximately twenty-six thousand members of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) walked picket lines in front of 580 schools for seven school days and won their demands for

⁹ USA, Argentina, Belgium, UK, Brasil, China, South Africa, Italy, Chile, Turkey and Uruguay

¹⁰ Emek Çalışmaları Topluluğu, *2023 Uluslararası Grev Raporu* (Emek Çalışmaları Topluluğu (Labor Studies Collective), 2025).

¹¹ Emek Çalışmaları Topluluğu, *2023 İşçi Eylemleri Raporu* (Emek Çalışmaları Topluluğu (Labor Studies Collective), 2024).

¹² B. Ross Schneider, "Teacher Unions, Political Machines, and the Thorny Politics of Education Reform in Latin America," *Politics & Society* 50, no. 1 (2021): 84–116; M. Sancak and I. Özel, "When Politics Gets in the Way: Domestic Coalitions and the Making of Skill Systems," *Review of International Political Economy* 25(3) (2018): 340–63; T. Béteille et al., "Teacher Unions in India: Diverse and Powerful," in *The Comparative Politics of Education: Teachers Unions and Education Systems around the World*, ed. T.M. Moe and S. Wiborg (chapter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 239–68; T.M. Moe, "The Comparative Politics of Education: Teachers Unions and Education Systems Around the World," in *The Comparative Politics of Education: Teachers Unions and Education Systems around the World*, ed. T.M. Moe and S. Wiborg (chapter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 269–324; B. Bruns and J. Luque, *Great Teachers: How to Raise Student Learning in Latin America and the Caribbean* (World Bank Publications, 2014).

¹³ Eric Blanc, *Red State Revolt: The Teachers' Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics*. (Verso, 2019); J. McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (Oxford University Press, 2016); M. Compton and L. Weiner, "The Global Assault on Teachers, Teaching, and Teacher Unions," in *The Global Assault on Teaching, Teachers, and Their Unions Stories for Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2008), 3–9.

common good of public education, as well as transforming the CTU from a top-down, bureaucratic organization into one of the most member-driven unions in the US¹⁴. Since 2010 the changed innovative and militant CTU leadership, believed in social-movement unionism, seeing teachers as part of a working class aligned with economically marginalized families, carried out the transformation within the union gradually. In the end, during the strike, CTU was supported by various community groups, parents, some unions, high school students, and a grassroots teacher network. By aligning their bargaining interests with the common good, CTU generated significant public support for their goals and were able to assert an analysis of why Chicago schools were under duress that effectively contradicted the reform narrative.

In 2018, a strike wave led by teachers and school workers for higher wages and better working conditions began in West Virginia and spread to Republican-majority states like Oklahoma and Arizona. Despite being illegal in these states, tens of thousands of education workers participated in strikes, raising public awareness of collective action. This movement not only improved conditions but also politicized teachers and increased union membership¹⁵. In areas with weak union structures, a militant minority of teachers took the lead, using social media to create spaces for solidarity, share experiences, and organize. Many were young self-identified socialists influenced by Bernie Sanders' 2016 campaign, and their efforts were crucial to the successes in West Virginia and Arizona¹⁶.

These teacher strikes exemplify the effectiveness of an emerging style of labor mobilization. At a time when traditional unions in the United States had all but abandoned the strike as a tactic, these highly popular and widely supported actions succeeded in securing victories against harsh governmental policies. Fundamentally, both strikes were characterized by bottom-up organizing, where teachers themselves mobilized their colleagues, directly challenging the bureaucratic structures and

¹⁴ McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*.

¹⁵ Blanc, *Red State Revolt: The Teachers' Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics*.

¹⁶ Ibid.

conventional methods of established unions. This grassroots approach, grounded in a worker-to-worker organizing model¹⁷, not only contested internal union hierarchies but also introduced a more militant dimension to the struggle through the use of illegal strikes and collective direct action. These strikes were not just symbolic actions, they were complete stoppages of “production processes”¹⁸, paralyzing major cities of the US. The strike in Chicago affected more than 400,000 people in 180,000 households, blocked traffic for days, and stopped business as usual. All of this was a concrete and very real use of force, as opposed to symbolic pickets. Ultimately, it was this form of organizing and resistance that led to tangible gains, demonstrating the transformative potential of militant, rank-and-file-driven labor insurgency.

Moreover, in addition to grassroots organizing, social coalitions and politicizing are also important dimensions in these models. Teachers have built strong alliances with parents through grassroots neighborhood organizations; campaigns against school closures have brought a discourse of social justice beyond union demands to the agenda; parents cooking on the picket line, families entrusting their children to teachers and the solidarity of various ethnic communities have concretized this unity. In these respects, this approach differs markedly from traditional trade unionism, representing a non-bureaucratic and militant tendency from below.

In addition to the militant revitalization tendency within the teachers’ unions, another reason to choose PSTU is depending on the mass flexibilization and privatization of education sector and thus precarization of the once well-paid profession of teaching (see Chapter 4). Today in Turkey, teachers are one of the most precarious groups in working classes, with wages close to minimum wage, long working hours, and the most deregulated workplaces. PSTU, the first union in the privatized education sector under the AKP’s authoritarian neoliberal rule, has emerged as a response to these authoritarian, flexible working conditions. The

¹⁷ Eric Blanc, *We Are the Union: How Worker-to-Worker Organizing Is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big* (Univ of California Press., 2025).

¹⁸ McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*.

interplay between these strategies and sectoral conditions has necessitated, or at least fostered, militancy and innovation. In this sense, it holds a unique position within the labor revitalization trend.

For these two reasons, the main focus of this research is conditions of the private education sector, how PSTU was established in this sector, PSTU's struggle strategies, and the transformation experienced by teachers, the union, and the private education sector throughout this struggle. In this context, the main research questions of this study are as follows:

RQ.1) How do sectoral conditions of precarity and deregulation shape the PSTU's strategic orientation across the market, class, and society poles?

RQ1a: Through what mechanisms do these conditions channel PSTU toward certain strategies?

RQ1b: How do PSTU's strategies in turn alter sectoral conditions?

RQ2: Through what processes does PSTU's struggle transform (i) teachers' individual empowerment, (ii) the union's strategic capacity and structure, and (iii) sectoral regulations?

In terms of question Q.1, I argue that the sectoral conditions that teachers are exposed to navigate the strategies of the PSTU led them to innovate new forms of action and creative solutions to their problems. By doing so, sectoral conditions indirectly caused the struggle against itself and that eventually transformed the sectoral conditions. However, my argument is not a deterministic one: while sectoral conditions necessitated the establishment of the union and the existence of the struggle, the agency of the individuals who founded the union and initiated the struggle constitutes one of the most fundamental characteristics of this struggle. The militant minority¹⁹ played a key role in the establishment of the PSTU and the innovations and strategic reorientations at various stages of the struggle.

¹⁹ Blanc, *We Are the Union: How Worker-to-Worker Organizing Is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big*.

On the other hand, my argument for Q.2 is as follows: the union's bottom-up, independent, militant, and democratic structure and strategies pushed individuals to embrace the union and take responsibility within it, creating a solidarity identity encompassing both their colleagues and the working class in general. The union's very structure and strategies have enabled it to possess strategic flexibility and enable it to develop creative responses to various sector problems and challenges faced during its struggles. This has allowed the union to maintain a dynamic structure rather than a fixed identity or struggle style since its founding. Finally, this dynamic, militant, and bottom-up structure, which dared to transform both its members and itself, has led to the resolution of problems and rights violations within the sector, largely stemming from deregulation. This has led to a rapid improvement in teachers' working conditions.

In particular, two mechanisms mediated these transformations. First, worker-to-worker diffusion enabled teachers to replicate organizing structures laterally across schools, accelerating the union's growth without reliance on professional organizers. Second, proceduralization of assemblies and decision-making created legitimacy and sustainability, though at times slowing militant escalation. Together, these mechanisms help explain how PSTU transformed individual empowerment, union strategy, and sectoral conditions.

By answering these questions, this study will also describe some of the characteristics of the revitalization of the labor movement in Turkey, drawing on the PSTU's case. I argue that the wave of revival in the labor movement that emerged after a long period of union stagnation in Turkey, especially when examined through the example of the PSTU, reveals the decisive role of militant, grassroots organization models and social alliances that differ from traditional unionism.

In doing so, the thesis contributes to three domains: theoretically, it extends Hyman's framework by showing how repression conditions strategic choice; empirically, it documents one of the rare instances of rapid combative union growth in Turkey; and methodologically, it uses the extended case method to connect everyday struggles to macro-structural

dynamics. This combination not only highlights the role of militant teachers but also underscores the broader recomposition of unionism under authoritarian neoliberalism.

The structure of this study is as follows: In Chapter 2, we will explore the strategies that unions have employed since the 20th century and delve into contemporary discussions regarding union methods. Through the lens of Hyman's²⁰ "strategic triangle" framework, different unions and the methods they apply will be classified. The aim of the chapter is to demonstrate the emergence of current decentralized, bottom-up trends of labor movement from a historical and analytical perspective. Continuing from this perspective, Chapter 3 will provide a concise history of the working class and labor struggles in Turkey, elucidating the current neoliberal landscape and emphasizing the characteristics of the recent revitalization wave within the labor movement.

Chapters 4 and 5 will present the findings from field studies. In assessing these findings, we will draw upon insights from Hyman's²¹ strategic triangle and Blanc's²² worker-to-worker model as conceptual frameworks. Through these two models, the PSTU's organizing and struggle strategies will be examined and the characteristics of the rising militant labor movement will be discussed.

§ 1.2 Methodology

To answer these questions, the struggle processes of PSTU were examined using the extended case method (ECM), as proposed by Burawoy²³, since it enables us to assess the interdependency or dialectical relationship between micro (strategies of PSTU) and macro (sectoral conditions of private education) as well as extending theoretical understandings

²⁰ R. Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society* (SAGE Publications, 2001).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Blanc, *We Are the Union: How Worker-to-Worker Organizing Is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big*.

²³ M. Burawoy, "The Extended Case Method," *Sociological Theory* 16, no. 1 (1998): 4–33.

rather than simply testing it. Following this methodology, I utilized participatory observation and action²⁴ in PSTU's organizing processes, collective actions and other gatherings, identifying myself both as a union member and a researcher. Hence, I have conducted intermittent research from May 2024 to September 2025, spending 90 days with the union and the teachers in total.

Throughout these 90 days, I joined sit-ins in Istanbul and Ankara, spent time with teachers to have conversations in Istanbul office of the union, attended legal support days being responsible for the preparation of the office for the event, participated in collective actions, especially in school demonstrations, and was a part of other kind of friendly gatherings of teachers.

On May 26, 2024, teachers began their sit-ins. Initially, as summer vacation had not yet started, teachers held their sit-ins outside the Provincial Directorates of National Education in the ten provinces where the union was organized, immediately following their school shifts. The sit-in in Ankara took place at Parliament Park, adjacent to the Turkish Grand National Assembly. After one month, the sit-ins in the provinces were discontinued, with the focus shifting solely to Ankara, where teachers from each province took turns participating in the sit-in. All duration of sit-in lasted a total of 53 days.

I participated in the sit-in process for 16 days, in both Istanbul and Ankara, attending an average of two evenings each week. I went to Ankara when the sit-in was centralized, two weeks before it ended, and I was a participant between July 1st to 7th. The sit-ins primarily involved spending time in the designated areas, hosting groups that came to express solidarity, and engaging with teachers who were not union members. This provided me with the opportunity to converse with teachers in pairs or small groups. Our discussions covered a range of topics, including daily issues, general political developments, shared experiences in the private sector, and perspectives on the current state of the struggle.

²⁴ S. Kindon et al., "Introduction," in *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting People, Participation and Place*, ed. S. Eds.). Kindon et al. (2007).

Through these interactions, I gained insights into the teachers' political views, their experiences as private sector educators, and their reflections on the ongoing union struggle. Although it was impossible to count and inappropriate to document every spontaneous conversations, I was able to meet and speak briefly with tens of teachers who participated in the sit-ins across Istanbul and Ankara. Many shared their experiences in the sector and recounted how they first became involved with the union or their role in its founding.

The strong relationship I developed with Oğuz, my fellow townspeople, whom I met at my first teachers' union sit-in, proved to be invaluable. Oğuz became an important access, interlocutor, and a friend for me. Through him, I not only got to know members of the union but also gained significant insights into its perspective through our discussions. Over the past year, Oğuz and I met sporadically—sometimes two or three times within a single week—due to various circumstances. While some meetings arose purely from the friendships we formed, others were linked to union functions, demonstrations, and similar events. Regardless of the context, each interaction with Oğuz provided meaningful insights that have shaped this study in multiple ways.

During the union's legal support days, held every Friday, unionized teachers received legal advice from volunteer attorneys regarding various issues they encountered at work. By attending these meetings, I had the chance to engage with tens of teachers individually and in focus groups about their problems. Over time, I took on the role of greeting each teacher on the union's duty roster, helping them navigate their queues to connect with the appropriate attorney, and chatting with them in the waiting room to hear their concerns.

The legal support days were vital for the union, serving both organizing and action planning purposes. Many teachers' issues were tracked over several weeks, prompting the union to take necessary formal and informal actions. If school administration failed to address a teacher's concern, the union would organize protests in front of the school, depending on the circumstances. My participation in the legal support days

allowed me to closely observe the action process at two schools and meet with teachers from those schools.

During the summer of 2025, even after completing the interviews for this study, I continued to participate in the union's events. This involvement allowed me to forge friendships not only with Oğuz but also with many other teachers associated with the union. These relationships deepened my understanding of unionized teachers and transcended the confines of the events themselves. While I discuss the transformative impact of the unionization on teachers in my study, the experience also transformed my own life significantly through the friendships I formed and the process of collective struggle.

My involvement in these events allowed me both to speak with unionized teachers about how they became unionized, the establishment of the union, their roles in its founding, their struggle strategies and the progress of ongoing sit-ins, and observe them during the entire process. Besides, I have conducted in-depth interviews with 11 teachers from different ranks in the union. All personal information obtained through observations and interviews has been anonymized.

Table 1.1 Anonymized Names of Interviewed Teachers

Names	Age	Role in the Union	Date of Unionization at the Moment of In- terview
Oğuz	38	General Secretary	4 years
Furkan	33	Active Member	4 years
Ecre	27	Member of the Central Executive Board	3,5 years
Dilek	29	Provincial Representative	4 years
Semiha	27	-	-
Fikret	25	Provincial Representative	4 years
Necip	28	Provincial Representative	2,5 years
Utku	29	Active Member	3,5 years
Ufuk	27	Member of the Central Executive Board	4 years
Ceren	32	Active Member	9 months
İshak	37	Active Member	3,5 years

1.2.1 Methodological Approach: Extended Case Method

This study adopts the ECM, as proposed by Michael Burawoy²⁵, to understand the organizing strategies and struggle repertoire of the Private Sector Teachers' Union (PSTU). Unlike classical positivist approaches like surveys or purely descriptive ethnographies, ECM treats empirical findings not merely as descriptive data, but as fields of observation shaped by a dialectical relationship with broader social structures. A fundamental assumption of ECM is that locally observed events are products of broader historical and structural relationships. In this context, the researcher uses contradictions, exceptions, and unexpected encounters within the field to test and extend the explanatory power of existing theoretical frameworks. Therefore, ECM positions the research process

²⁵ Burawoy, "The Extended Case Method."

not as a means to generate theory, but rather as a tool to extend the boundaries and reconstruct existing theories. This allows for unveiling the relationships between historical processes, structural contexts, and actor strategies.

At the core of ECM lies the concept of "reflexive science," which is based on intersubjectivity between the scientist and the subject of study. Unlike positivist approaches that abstract the researcher from the research subject and suggest maintaining an objective stance, reflexive science acknowledges that the researcher's presence, interactions, and even personal experiences in the field inevitably shape the research process and findings. This reflexive approach, as Burawoy²⁶ states, values intervention, process, structuration, and theory reconstruction. It requires the researcher to move beyond being merely an external observer and become an actor who interacts with the social world being studied, gaining deeper insights through these interactions. As Birelma²⁷ states, "the observer identity extends towards the participant identity, observations extend to different spaces and times, curiosity about external and major forces extends towards small but valuable differentiations, and the expectation of confirming theories through fieldwork extends towards disproving theories."

ECM views exceptional situations, contradictions, and unexpected findings in the field as crucial opportunities, rather than merely aiming to confirm or disconfirm existing theories. These "anomalies" serve to indicate the inadequacy or blind spots of existing theoretical frameworks. Consequently, the researcher utilizes these deviations to broaden the scope of theories, question their assumptions, and potentially develop new theoretical propositions. For instance, by applying this method to understand PSTU's strategies, the applicability and limitations of contemporary strategies in the trade union movement literature will be tested within the Turkish context, potentially contributing to the conceptualization of new approaches to unionism.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ A. Birelma, *Ekmek ve Haysiyet Mücadelesi. Günümüz Türkiye'sinde Üç İşçi Hareketinin Etnografisi* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2014), 40.

Furthermore, ECM strongly emphasizes the extralocal and historical context. It focuses on understanding how micro-level observations – in this study, the case of PSTU's actions and organizing practices – are shaped by broader social, economic, political, and historical forces. The challenges faced or strategies developed by a trade union or social movement cannot be explained solely by that organization's internal dynamics; they are deeply intertwined with extralocal and historical contexts such as state policies, neoliberal globalization, changes in labor laws, gender relations, and historical labor movement experiences. In this study, PSTU's strategies are analyzed in relation to macro-structural factors like Turkey's neoliberal education regime, state repression of trade union activities, and the legal framework that institutionalizes job insecurity. The union's shift from negotiation to public visibility, for example, is conceptualized as a reflection of this broader context.

Finally, ECM necessitates a continuous critical questioning of how the researcher's position and identity (in my case, as both a member and researcher of PSTU) affect the research process and findings. This also includes addressing what Burawoy²⁸ calls "effects of power," such as the potential for the researcher to dominate, silence, objectify, or normalize participants in the field. Therefore, constant consideration has been given to how my own position influenced my interactions with unionized teachers and the information they shared, and the role this played in interpreting that information. This reflexive approach aims to enhance the reliability and depth of the data obtained.

1.2.2 *Researcher's Positionality*

As a young researcher studying the contemporary union movement in Turkey, I approached the PSTU's activities with admiration and profound sympathy. Above all, as a researcher, I must reflect on this sympathy. I participated in many demonstrations and meetings as an official and true/active member of the union. While I never forgot my identity as a

²⁸ Burawoy, "The Extended Case Method."

researcher, the tone I adopted in conversations was more like that of a member eager to advance the union's struggle than a researcher.

But this sympathy also brought criticism of decisions made within the union: many times, I would take a different stance with unionized teachers, prompting them to justify their decisions once again, when they were talking to me. This allowed me to see what they were considering when making decisions and developing their strategies, and by engaging in genuine strategic discussions, it also paved the way for them to defend their decisions more confidently. Sometimes they accepted my criticisms, and even before I knew it, similar criticisms were being made within the union's boards.

My sympathy, and the criticism that flowed from it, led teachers to be more open with me. Even though they were surprised by details I asked that seemed trivial or excessive to them (for example, how the speaking order was determined in meetings where decisions were made), they also expressed their pleasure at being asked. They made every effort to ensure no details were left out and frequently expressed their curiosity about the results of my research.

Another area of reflection could be on the alterations resulting from my being an official and active member of the union. As the union operates in the same sector as my profession, there were no legal impediments to my becoming a member. So, I officially joined the union. In one of our first conversations with unionized teachers during the sit-in, I explained that despite not being a teacher, I had joined the union out of solidarity. They welcomed this very positively and expressed their gratitude.

It seems unlikely that PSTU will overcome the sector-wide threshold which is a required membership rate to be able to be authorized in a workplace and sign a collective agreement. This is because the "Trade, Office, Education, and Fine Arts" sector (sector 10), in which it operates, is the largest of Turkey's 20 sectors, employing 4,469,945 workers²⁹. For this reason, I thought that my membership signifies nothing more than political solidarity. Nevertheless, being able to say that I am a union

²⁹ General Directorate of Labor, 2025

member and establish a connection with them was an important step for me. Because being an official and active member provide me significantly access to the field. I had access to many internal communication channels, including meetings, group discussions, etc. This membership situation, as I mentioned above, also gave rise to the membership-researcher dilemma.

Another component of this dilemma was my identification of myself as a member of a political organization committed to supporting the working-class movement. I occasionally discussed the political stance of this organization with the teachers during my field interviews. This information about myself somewhat altered their perception of me. It became clear that I was not just any individual showing solidarity; for me, this solidarity had an ethical-political dimension. Because so many teachers within the union were members and sympathizers of various political organizations, my affiliation went unnoticed and was considered normal. In fact, it reinforced the feeling of being "one of them" for both them and me.

Then, as our conversations with the teachers progressed, it also became apparent that I was familiar with union terminology, knew about socialist trade union traditions, and that we shared common ground in terms of this linguistic usage. For instance, in one of our conversations, Oğuz criticized a political faction within the union by simply saying, "They're just petty-bourgeois radicals," without fully explaining the faction's stance, expecting me to understand from that phrase. Political closeness and similarity combined with linguistic familiarity strengthened their sense of being "one of us."

Throughout the study, I felt the tension between being one of them and being an outsider—what I described above as the member-researcher dilemma—and ultimately, I incorporated the feelings and thoughts this dilemma evoked in me into my assessments of the union and incorporated them into my analysis. In addition, my own class background, experiences with job insecurity, and previous ties to the labor movement also shaped my perceptions in the field. Therefore, throughout this study, I meticulously analyzed not only the field actors but also

the evolution, impact, and limitations of my own position. The reflexive nature of ECM allowed me to analytically process this ongoing self-assessment.



Historical Development of Union Strategies

This chapter examines how trade union strategies have historically adapted to shifting structural dynamics, such as neoliberal reforms and authoritarian policies¹. While these strategies have varied, unions have consistently sought to protect workers from exploitation. Understanding how different strategic repertoires—ranging from revolutionary syndicalism to grassroots models—emerged in relation to structural constraints is essential for contextualizing contemporary experiments in labor organizing. In particular, the chapter highlights how recent approaches reflect both a critique of different types of unionisms and an attempt to revitalize worker power in hostile environments.

¹ This section has primarily engaged with developments and strategic debates in the Global North. This focus reflects not only the longer industrial histories and union traditions of these societies, but also the asymmetry of the academic literature, which has overwhelmingly concentrated on the Global North. While examples from the Global South are occasionally referenced—especially in relation to social movement unionism—they are not treated extensively. Readers should therefore recognize that the account offered here may be of limited applicability to the Global South contexts, and that this limitation stems as much from the biases of existing scholarship as from the scope of this study itself.

As a conceptual tool, Richard Hyman's² strategic triangle offers a flexible yet robust framework to categorize union strategies across three poles: class, market, and society.

Hyman³ underscores that trade unions, shaped by divergent historical and national conditions, adopt a wide spectrum of strategic orientations. To bring analytical clarity to this complexity, he identifies three ideal types of unionism, each linked to distinctive ideological traditions. The first one, class unionism, conceives of unions as vehicles of anti-capitalist opposition. Rooted in left-wing traditions, it emphasizes militancy and political mobilization, with the mission of advancing class interests. The second, social-integrationist unionism, arose as both a rival and partial extension of the first. Rejecting the stark dualism of capital versus labor, it views unionism as an instrument of social harmony. The late nineteenth-century Catholic social thought exemplified this orientation, and as social democracy shifted from revolutionary transformation to evolutionary reform, it too adopted this integrative stance. Despite organizational conflicts, Christian democratic and social democratic unionisms converged ideologically in prioritizing welfare and cohesion. The third model, business unionism, developed most strongly in the United States, and reflects a conscious pursuit of economism. Centered on collective bargaining, it criticizes militant currents for neglecting occupational concerns and ignoring opportunities in the labor market.

² Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

³ Ibid.

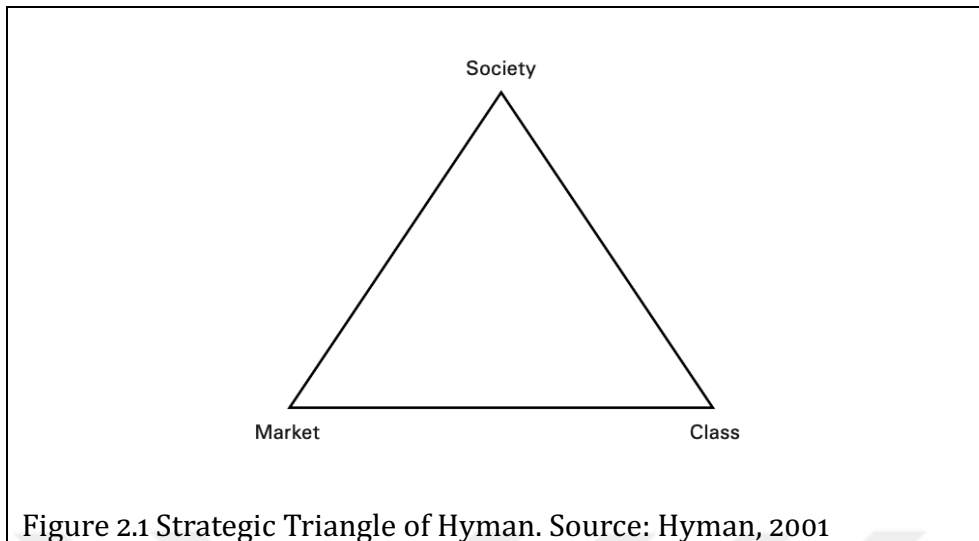


Figure 2.1 Strategic Triangle of Hyman. Source: Hyman, 2001

For Hyman⁴, these three models constitute the poles of a strategic triangle: class, society, and market. Unions are positioned within this space according to how they balance these dimensions. Yet, he stresses that no union orients itself exclusively to one pole. As associations of employees, they must regulate the wage-labor relationship and secure protections in the market. As worker organizations, they represent collective class interests, even without an explicit class ideology. And as institutions embedded in society, their survival requires coexistence with other organizations and groups, even adversaries.

In practice, union identities are hybrid and often contradictory, usually combining two poles—between class and market, market and society, or society and class. Material conditions and ideological traditions shape these orientations, while periods of crisis often shift emphasis toward the previously neglected third pole. This dynamic interplay, Hyman argues, explains the evolving character of trade union identities.

In the case of the PSTU, Hyman's⁵ framework provides a useful lens to analyze how the union tactically shifts between different poles,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

navigating between militancy, bargaining, and societal alliances—in the context of Turkey’s authoritarian neoliberalism.

The sections that follow trace this historical evolution and explore how contemporary innovations resonate with the organizing strategies of the PSTU.

§ 2.1 Early Militant Unionism and the Class Pole

Waged labor places workers in an unequal relationship with employers, who control the means of production, leaving individual workers with limited power. This imbalance makes individual resistance ineffective, as a lone worker's rejection of terms simply leads to their dismissal or resignation without gaining any bargaining leverage. Therefore, effective bargaining requires workers to organize collectively, which gives trade unions their historical and strategic importance. By uniting workers' fragmented power, unions become a countervailing force that can compel employers to negotiate. Friedrich Engels⁶ noted this early on, seeing unions as the first collective effort by the proletariat to overcome their internal divisions and challenge the dominance of capital. These early dynamics laid the foundation for strategic orientations later theorized by Hyman⁷ under the 'class pole'.

Early trade unions were not fully formed strategic institutions but evolved from earlier associations like craft guilds and mutual aid societies. These groups adapted to the rise of industrial capitalism, becoming more sophisticated to counter the challenges of large-scale production and job insecurity. The formation of national unions marked a key institutional shift, a direct response to changes in both work and state power⁸. This evolution was significantly shaped by the writings of Marx and Engels and the First International, which spurred a rapid ideological and political transformation. Throughout this process, unions have navigated

⁶ F. Engels, “The Condition of the Working Class in England. Progress Publishers,” 1952, 218–219.

⁷ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 72–77.

a difficult relationship with the state, where they have often traded their power to resist for institutional legitimacy⁹.

In the early 20th century, growing working-class dissatisfaction with established political and labor institutions led to a surge of radicalism across Europe and the USA. This new militancy, known as syndicalism, emerged from the perceived failures of mainstream social democratic parties and trade unions to achieve meaningful change¹⁰.

In contrast to reformist unions, syndicalists rejected compromise and rooted their strategies in direct industrial action, guided by the principle that emancipation must be achieved by workers themselves. As the French syndicalist Émile Pouget asserted, syndicalism's superiority lay in its "doctrinal sobriety," with unions preferring to act rather than philosophize¹¹. Thus, syndicalism became an experimental, action-oriented ideology that favored spontaneity and direct confrontation over the theoretical debates of other radical traditions.

Syndicalists championed direct economic action—including strikes, boycotts, and sabotage—as the primary means to advance workers' interests. They rejected the bureaucratic compromises of established unions, advocating instead for independent, industrial-level worker organization. Their strategic horizon culminated in the revolutionary general strike, envisioned as the decisive blow against capitalism and the foundation for a society based on workers' self-management¹². Syndicalist literature framed individual grievances as part of a broader class struggle, consistently condemning union leadership's complicity with the state and urging uncompromising militancy. Their influence was vividly

⁹ R. Hyman, *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction* (Macmillan, 1975); McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*.

¹⁰ Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe, *Revolutionary Syndicalism: An International Perspective* (1990); Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

¹¹ Linden and Thorpe, *Revolutionary Syndicalism: An International Perspective*; R. Darlington, *Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism: An International Comparative Analysis* (Ashgate, 2008).

¹² Darlington, *Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism: An International Comparative Analysis*.

demonstrated by significant industrial actions, such as the surge in strikes in Britain between 1910 and 1914, the 1913 Dublin lockout, and the mass strikes and factory occupations in Italy during the Biennio Rosso between 1919 and 1920¹³.

In essence, syndicalists opposed existing unions and parties, preferring to establish their own independent organizations. Their aggressive repertoire of actions included strikes and factory occupations, and they were single-minded in their revolutionary perspective. They believed that by expanding and connecting class struggles in industrial centers, they could initiate a general strike that would ultimately lead to a workers' revolution. This focus on the worker as the sole agent of change, a philosophy they termed *ouvrierism*, also led them to favor simple, accessible pamphlets over elaborate theoretical texts to foster class consciousness.

From Hyman's¹⁴ perspective, syndicalism is a movement that almost exclusively champions the 'class opposition' pole. Syndicalists believe unions are the primary agents of revolutionary change, aiming to dismantle capitalism and the state through direct industrial action, most notably the general strike. Their vision goes beyond mere economic gains; they seek a complete social transformation where workers directly control production, replacing the capitalist state with a decentralized federation of workers' councils.

For syndicalists, engaging in traditional collective bargaining, or the 'market' pole, is purely a tactical move to build worker solidarity and prepare for the ultimate confrontation, not an end in itself. They vehemently oppose any form of social partnership or collaboration with the state or employers, viewing it as a co-optation of the labor movement and a betrayal of revolutionary principles. This radical stance also extends to their community organizing. Instead of seeking to integrate into existing societal institutions, they use community organizing to build a broad, self-reliant working-class movement from the ground up, fostering solidarity

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

and preparing for the general strike. The community becomes a base for mobilization and resistance against the capitalist order, not a sphere for collaborative governance. This insistence on independence from political parties and a focus on direct industrial power positions syndicalism as an extreme, yet historically significant, manifestation of the class struggle dimension within Hyman's¹⁵ framework. This extreme attachment to the class pole mirrors some of the recent grassroots union experiments in Turkey, where institutional politics are rejected in favor of direct confrontation.

After 1917, the Soviet Revolution significantly increased the influence of Marxist and Bolshevik currents within the militant working class. The Bolsheviks attempted to unite with syndicalists through the Comintern¹⁶ and the Red International of Labor Unions¹⁷ (RILU) to spread communism globally. However, this unity was short-lived due to key strategic disagreements¹⁸.

Syndicalists initially greeted the Bolshevik Revolution with great enthusiasm, seeing it as the realization of their own ideals. As the American syndicalist Bill Haywood stated, "The Russian Revolution is the greatest event in our lives... It represents all that we have been dreaming of and fighting for¹⁹". However, the Bolsheviks' newfound authority to guide revolutionaries led to disagreements at the Comintern and RILU congresses between 1920 and 1922²⁰. The main disagreements revolved

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The Comintern, short for the Communist International and also known as the Third International, was an international organization founded in 1919 by Vladimir Lenin and the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks). Its primary purpose was to promote world communism and support revolutionary movements globally.

¹⁷ RILU, was a global organization founded by the Comintern to serve as its trade union arm and to counter the influence of the reformist trade unions that were part of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU).

¹⁸ Darlington, *Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism: An International Comparative Analysis*.

¹⁹ Ibid., 185.

²⁰ Ibid., 187–90.

around party centralism, revolutionary strategy, and whether to work within or outside existing unions.

Syndicalists were separatists, who preferred to form their own unions rather than organizing within existing reformist ones. In contrast, the Bolsheviks advocated for revolutionaries to infiltrate and seize power within existing labor bodies. Furthermore, syndicalists viewed unions as the primary instrument of revolution, while the Bolsheviks insisted on the hierarchical superiority of a vanguard political party, which RILU was subordinate to. This fundamental clash over the role of the party and the union ultimately led to the syndicalists' disillusionment and rejection of Bolshevik proposals²¹. Ultimately, syndicalists could not accept the insistence on the central role of a vanguard political party and the establishment of centralized state power within the revolutionary process²². In the Great Depression and the lead-up to the Second World War, syndicalist influence waned while the Bolsheviks increased their sway over the European labor movement. The Bolsheviks' strategic theses on unionism prevailed, despite their revolutionary cadres' limited success in significantly transforming mainstream unions after the 1940s.

Under Stalin, the Comintern mandated that communist parties actively participate in existing unions. This strategy, famously articulated by Lenin in his pamphlet "Left-Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder," argued against withdrawing from "reactionary" unions and instead advocated for reforming them from within. However, this approach often led to internal divisions or forced communists to temper their militancy to prevent unions from fracturing²³.

Following World War II and the onset of the Cold War, the "united front" policy disintegrated. As communist unionists gained prominence, the relationship between their political ideology and day-to-day union activities became increasingly strained. This led to a curious irony: the more successful these activists were, the more they faced Hyman's three interrelated tensions: the conflict between socio-political change and

²¹ Ibid., 191.

²² Ibid., 192.

²³ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*, 26.

practical economic objectives; the tension between conflict and concession; and the tension between class unity and sectional interests²⁴.

Both syndicalists and Bolsheviks shared a deep commitment to the 'class opposition' pole, aiming for a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. However, their core disagreements were centered on the organizational and leadership aspects of this opposition. The syndicalists advocated for a union-centric approach, while the Bolsheviks insisted on the necessity of a vanguard political party. Ultimately, even as revolutionary unionism evolved from the syndicalist model to a party-led communist one, the structural dilemmas identified by Hyman—between militancy and integration, unity and fragmentation, transformation and survival—persisted. This historical trajectory is crucial for understanding the revival of class-oriented strategies in contemporary unionism. As the following chapters will show, some grassroots unions in Turkey—including the PSTU—echo syndicalist principles by rejecting institutional compromise, embracing direct action, and envisioning unionism as a vehicle for transformative class struggle within increasingly repressive and precarious conditions.

§ 2.2 Bureaucratization, Institutional Compromise, and the Market/Society Poles

WWII reconfigured industrial relations by expanding union influence under new state-mediated frameworks. In the postwar years, unions gained significant bargaining power, driven by the momentum of wartime production and labor shortages, which had led to record levels of union membership²⁵. At the same time, however, this newfound strength unfolded within a structural compromise that fundamentally redefined the relationships between labor, capital, and the state.

²⁴ Ibid., 28.

²⁵ R.H. Zieger and G.J. Gall, *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

In North America and beyond, the state has played a pivotal role in formalizing labor relations. Laws such as the Wagner Act (1935) in the U.S. and PC 1003 (1944) in Canada institutionalized collective bargaining while simultaneously subjecting unions to restrictive legal supervision. While many scholars view these reforms as triumphs for labor, critical analyses highlight their dual nature: state intervention provided legal protections but also imposed constraints through complex certification processes and stringent strike regulations²⁶. During this period, unions often sacrificed militancy to adhere to legal boundaries. Ultimately, business unionism—which sought a compromise with the state and capital to improve workers' living standards—became the dominant approach. This legal-bureaucratic incorporation of labor did not radically transform class relations but, as Panitch and Swartz²⁷ argued, solidified a new mode of hegemony—a formalization of consent in labor-capital relations. The post-war settlement "locked" labor into a framework of responsibility and managerial cooperation, prioritizing industrial peace over militant struggle²⁸.

A defining element of the postwar era was the emergence of the "corporate consensus," also known as Fordism or industrial pluralism. This involved unions and employers collaborating to ensure industrial stability in exchange for wage gains, job security, and benefits²⁹. At the heart of this consensus was the ideology of "responsible unionism," which required unions to prioritize productivity over militancy. However, as McInnis³⁰ argues, this was not a natural evolution but a deliberate strategy by business elites and state officials to curb working-class dissent. Institutions such as Labor-Management Production Committees (LMPCs) were

²⁶ J. Fudge and E. Tucker, *Labour Before the Law: The Regulation of Workers' Collective Action in Canada, 1900–1948* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁷ L. Panitch and D. Swartz, *From Consent to Coercion: The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms* (Garamond Press, 2003).

²⁸ P.S. McInnis, *Harnessing Labour Confrontation: Shaping the Postwar Settlement in Canada, 1943–1950* (University of Toronto Press, 2002).

²⁹ Zieger and Gall, *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth Century*, 182–188.

³⁰ McInnis, *Harnessing Labour Confrontation: Shaping the Postwar Settlement in Canada, 1943–1950*.

instrumental in co-opting union leaders into managerial logic, muting oppositional politics and reinforcing industrial hierarchy. In short, these committees absorbed union leadership into a framework that undermined rank-and-file mobilization and cemented labor's role as a partner in maintaining the status quo.

However, this period of consensus, in addition to the gains it brought to unions, also entailed some structural and strategic transformations. Unions evolved into large, bureaucratic organizations; increasing membership and the management of complex collective agreements necessitated professional and centralized leadership³¹. This led to union leaders becoming distanced from their members, with internal democracy and militancy giving way to a more institutionalized structure. Bureaucratization became both a tool and a symptom of containment, transforming unions into technocratic organizations estranged from their grassroots base. As Smith³² underlines, this process led to a depoliticization of labor, particularly under Cold War pressures, as unions purged leftist elements, narrowed their political agendas, and aligned themselves with centrist parties like the U.S. Democrats. This institutionalization fundamentally changed the nature of the labor movement, shifting its focus from a broad social project to a narrow set of economic and political goals. Bureaucratization became both a tool and a symptom of containment, transforming unions into technocratic organizations estranged from their grassroots base.

Indeed, political entanglement came at a high cost. Legislative victories, such as opposing the Taft-Hartley Act (1947), came with the strategic retreat from more radical objectives, such as the shorter hours movement or democratization of union structures³³. The promise of Keynesian stability and mass consumption proved too alluring for union elites, who

³¹ Zieger and Gall, *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth Century*, 192–95.

³² C. Smith, "The Postwar Compromise and the Future of North American Unionism," *Left History* 11, no. 1 (2006): 123–38.

³³ J. Cutler, *Labor's Time: Shorter Hours, the UAW and the Struggle for American Unionism* (Temple University Press, 2004).

chose integration into state-sanctioned institutional frameworks over broader class confrontation.

Further, while unions were forced to confront growing internal diversity, including the integration of women, African Americans, and immigrant workers, their record was mixed at best. Many unions resisted meaningful reforms, and the new legal order often excluded precarious, racialized, and gendered labor sectors altogether³⁴. This exclusion would later haunt the movement, as its social base narrowed and its transformative potential diminished.

On the other hand, in continental Europe, the same themes of compromise were at play, but in a different way. Starting in the 1930s in Sweden, the industrial relations system shifted from one of conflict to one of industrial peace. Hyman³⁵ describes two contradictory accounts here. One view interprets this as a strategic decision by trade unionists to move away from militant struggle toward leveraging political influence for full employment. The opposing view argues that unions yielded to organized employers and a government that prioritized the needs of private capital. Regardless of which account is more valid, unions, in exchange for social reforms and improved material conditions, declared themselves prepared to show "social responsibility"³⁶. This model, known as "social partnership," prefigured post-war patterns elsewhere in Europe³⁷ and reflected a positive view of compromise in industrial relations, underscoring the importance of trade unionism.

In conclusion, the postwar era must be understood not only as a period of gains for organized labor but as a moment of fundamental restructuring in which unions were disciplined into state and capitalist logics. In Hyman's³⁸ framework, the dominant modes of trade unionism in this

³⁴ R. Fantasia and K. Voss, *Hard Work: Remaking the American Labor Movement* (University of California Press, 2004).

³⁵ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

³⁶ A. Kjellberg, "Sweden: Can the Model Survive?," in *Industrial Relations in the New Europe*, ed. A. Ferner and R. Hyman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 88–142.

³⁷ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

³⁸ Ibid.

period were business unionism in North America and social partnership in Europe. The legal protections afforded by the postwar compromise were deeply ambivalent: they institutionalized union presence while simultaneously limiting its oppositional power. As neoliberalism emerged in the late 20th century, the structural weaknesses seeded during this period—legal dependency, bureaucratic inertia, and political conservatism—left unions vulnerable to decline and irrelevance. These institutional and ideological constraints, once seen as guarantees of stability, are precisely what the PSTU would later reject—choosing instead to challenge legality, bureaucracy, and state-centered bargaining as obstacles to meaningful change.

§ 2.3 Strategic Crisis and the Rise of Hybrid Strategies

The global capitalist restructuring that began in the 1970s profoundly disrupted organized labor across much of the world. This period was marked by a confluence of interrelated economic transformations: the expansion of global trade, the adoption of lean production techniques, increased capital mobility, and a widespread shift toward subcontracting and outsourcing. These developments, combined with the rapid decline of manufacturing employment in many advanced economies, generated an increasingly hostile terrain for labor organizing. Traditional union strategies—mostly business unionism predicated on long-term employment, centralized bargaining, and sectoral stability—proved increasingly inadequate in the face of globalized production regimes and intensified competition among workers across borders³⁹. In this volatile context, union density declined sharply, especially in countries that experienced rapid privatization, anti-union legislation, mass layoffs, and outright state repression. Transnational corporations exploited the fragmentation of labor markets by relocating production to jurisdictions with lower labor standards and weaker regulatory oversight, thereby undermining the

³⁹ K. Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy* (Verso, 1997).

efficacy of nationally-bound labor strategies⁴⁰. Emergent responses were often approaches leaning towards the class and society poles of Hyman's⁴¹ triangle, or attempting to integrate elements from all three.

Early union responses to these shifts were largely defensive, aiming to preserve historical gains in wages, benefits, and working conditions. However, in a short period of time, it was recognized that traditional repertoires of union action were insufficient. In this context, in the 1990s, serious strategic innovations such as organizing of the unorganized, grassroots political action, coalition building, labor-management partnership, union mergers, and international solidarity were implemented, signaling a strategic reorientation within the labor movement⁴².

The strategies employed during this era can be broadly classified into the often overlapping four categories, which will be explored in the next subsections: (i) Defensive consolidation and internal reform (early response), (ii) social movement unionism (SMU), (iii) corporate campaigns, (iv) worker centers and new organizational forms.

2.3.1 *From Defensive Retrenchment to New Unionism*

The restructuring of global capitalism triggered a crisis of strategy for labor unions. Traditional models based on narrow collective bargaining frameworks proved increasingly ineffective amid workplace fragmentation, precarization, and the marginalization of racialized and gendered workers. Led predominantly by older white men, unions struggled to respond to broader social concerns, resulting in a dual crisis of legitimacy and capacity⁴³.

⁴⁰ K. Bronfenbrenner and D. Warren, *The Empirical Case for Streamlining the NLRB Certification Process: The Role of Date of Unfair Labor Practice Occurrence* (2011).

⁴¹ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

⁴² McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*.

⁴³ T. Juravich, "Beating Global Capital:," in *Global Unions*, 1st ed., ed. K. Bronfenbrenner, Challenging Transnational Capital through Cross-Border Campaigns (Cornell University Press, 2007), 16–39, JSTOR; Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between*

Many unions initially sought mergers or absorptions to survive financially, prioritizing market strategies over structural renewal. While this offered temporary stability, it did little to address the political and organizational stagnation. By the late 1980s, reform initiatives began to emerge within some unions. In France, Spain, and Germany, internal dissidents pushed for participatory democracy and broader social agendas⁴⁴. Simultaneously, a new generation of organizers—many from feminist, anti-racist, and immigrant rights movements—entered the labor field, bringing with them a more inclusive and activist vision of unionism⁴⁵. During this period, some unions undertook initiatives to organize precarious low-wage immigrant workers, including those without authorization, and soon disproved the common belief that such workers were "unorganizable"⁴⁶.

These organizing drives not only challenged long-held assumptions but also reoriented union agendas from defensive preservation to proactive social engagement. They also reoriented union agendas from defensive preservation to proactive organizing and social engagement. Although these were still fragmented, they paved the way for more comprehensive frameworks like social movement unionism.

In the U.S., a new wave of labor activism emerged in the 1990s, exemplified by Ron Carey's leadership in the Teamsters and the rise of the "New Voice" coalition within the AFL-CIO. These efforts emphasized internal democracy, participatory organizing, and a break from bureaucratic conservatism. Campaigns like Union Summer and Justice for

Market, Class and Society; Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy*.

⁴⁴ Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy*, 196.

⁴⁵ Kim Voss and Rachel Sherman, "Breaking the Iron Law of Oligarchy," *American Journal of Sociology* 106, no. 2 (2000): 303–49.

⁴⁶ "Ruth Milkman L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement . New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 2006," *Socio-Economic Review* 5, no. 2 (2007): 369–85.

Janitors embodied a more militant and socially engaged unionism⁴⁷. These campaigns did not merely revive organizing techniques but reflected a broader conceptual shift—toward what scholars came to call social movement unionism.

2.3.2 *Social Movement Unionism (SMU)*

The New Social Movements (NSMs) that emerged in the second half of the 20th century sparked significant debates within the labor movement⁴⁸. Traditional socialist propositions, such as the working class being the exclusive vanguard of revolution, came under intense criticism. As a result, worker struggles are no longer viewed solely as economic or political but as part of a broader fight linked with other social movements. The issue is now understood within the context of interconnected and interdependent structures, including capital, the state, patriarchy, imperialism, and racism, with all considered equally important areas of struggle.

This new approach, known as Social Movement Unionism (SMU), was characterized by Waterman⁴⁹ as a union strategy that goes beyond improving wages and conditions to end labor exploitation. It aims to mobilize unorganized workers and forge alliances with other democratic movements, such as feminism, human rights, and anti-racism. SMU rejects vanguardism, instead seeking to cooperate with allies as an autonomous, equal, and democratic partner. It also addresses new social issues, supports workplace democracy, and establishes international solidarity networks with other democratic forces.

⁴⁷ Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy*; Voss and Sherman, "Breaking the Iron Law of Oligarchy"; R. Milkman, "Introduction: Toward a New Labor Movement? Organizing New York City's Precariat," in *New Labor in New York: Precarious Workers and the Future of the Labor Movement*, ed. R. Milkman and E. Ott (Cornell University Press, 2014), 1–22.

⁴⁸ P. Waterman, "Social-Movement Unionism: A New Union Model for a New World Order?," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 16, no. 3 (1993): 245–78.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

To establish SMU, a clear break from business unionism is required. Business unionism, which long dominated the American labor landscape, focused primarily on securing economic gains within the existing system. Although this model achieved notable material gains in the mid-twentieth century, it has been increasingly criticized for its inability to address deeper structural inequalities and its detachment from broader struggles for social transformation⁵⁰.

Turner and Hurd⁵¹ trace SMU back to early syndicalist efforts in the U.S. and Europe, viewing the organizing of unorganized workers as its core characteristic. While business unionism dominated the labor movement from the 1950s to the 1980s, leaving unions largely defenseless against rising employer opposition, the 1990s brought a period of revitalization. This revitalization included key strategic innovations such as new organizing drives, grassroots political action, coalition-building, and international solidarity⁵². These efforts culminated in the emergence of the "New Voice" leadership within the AFL-CIO, which was seen as a crucial step toward developing the SMU approach within existing unions⁵³.

Unlike Turner and Hurd⁵⁴, Waterman⁵⁵ and Moody⁵⁶ highlight labor movements in the Global South. Faced with repressive regimes, informalized labor markets, and neoliberal restructuring, these movements were compelled to adopt more militant and expansive forms of organizing, referred to as SMU. The shift of capital to these regions inadvertently fostered new epicenters of working-class militancy where traditional union strategies proved inadequate. In response, unions began forging alliances

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ L. Turner and R. Hurd, "Building Social Movement Unionism. Rekindling the Movement: Labor's Quest for Relevance in the Twenty-First Century," 2001, 9–26.

⁵² Steven Fraser and Joshua B. Freeman, *Audacious Democracy: Labor, Intellectuals and the Social Reconstruction of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

⁵³ Turner and Hurd, "Building Social Movement Unionism. Rekindling the Movement: Labor's Quest for Relevance in the Twenty-First Century."

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Waterman, "Social-Movement Unionism: A New Union Model for a New World Order?," 270–75.

⁵⁶ Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy*, 227–230.

with community organizations and social movements, integrating labor struggles with broader demands for democracy, public services, and social justice.

Illustrative examples include the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), which played a pivotal role in the anti-apartheid movement. In Brazil, the Unified Workers' Central (CUT) fused economic demands with democratic reforms. Similarly, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) emerged as a militant federation committed to grassroots mobilization and resistance to neoliberal restructuring. These unions did not confine themselves to wage negotiations but emerged as integral actors in broader political struggles⁵⁷. These examples embody the core principles of SMU: rank-and-file participation, mass mobilization, coalition-building, and a rejection of bureaucratic and top-down organizational structures.

SMU's strategic proposal is that unions must politicize their agendas, moving beyond narrow workplace issues to challenge the broader logics of neoliberalism, including privatization, inequality, and authoritarianism. Rather than relying solely on state institutions or legal mechanisms, unions should embrace direct action and mass protest as vehicles of worker empowerment. For Moody⁵⁸, the future of labor depends not on a nostalgic revival of postwar corporatist arrangements but on the adoption of bottom-up strategies grounded in militancy and solidarity.

Moody⁵⁹ identifies analogous tendencies in the capitalist North. For instance, the 1995 Detroit Newspaper Agency (DNA) strike in Michigan illustrated SMU's logic. Defying legal injunctions and police repression, workers mobilized mass pickets and disrupted city governance, framing their economic struggle as a broader fight for political accountability. The strike demonstrated collective resistance that linked workplace issues to community politics, rejected bureaucratic passivity, and foregrounded worker agency in the face of neoliberal rationalization.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 240–42.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 243–245.

⁵⁹ Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy*.

In sum, SMU rests on four principles: shifting from servicing to grassroots organizing; reclaiming disruptive tactics like strikes; forging cross-sectoral alliances with social movements; and recomposing solidarity around shared experiences of precarity and exploitation.

Within Hyman's⁶⁰ framework, SMU should be located between the class and society poles since it views labor struggles as part of a broader political fight against capital, state, patriarchy, imperialism, and racism and also seeks deep integration with civil society organizations. By these ends, SMU approach utilizes tactics as organizing the unorganized, prioritizing outreach and mobilization of precarious, low-wage, and marginalized workers⁶¹; grassroots mobilization and direct action, reinvigorating the capacity for disruption through strikes, civil disobedience, and mass protests, rather than relying solely on legalistic bargaining⁶²; coalition-building and cross-sectoral alliances, forging alliances with community organizations, faith groups, human rights activists, and other social movements (e.g., feminist, anti-racist movements) to broaden support and legitimacy, examples include COSATU in South Africa, CUT in Brazil, and KCTU in South Korea; politicization of demands, expanding bargaining demands beyond traditional wages and conditions to include broader social issues like public services, racial justice, gender equality, democratic governance, new technologies, sexual harassment, and immigration rights⁶³; international solidarity, building transnational networks to confront global capital, as seen in the Royal Dutch/Shell boycott and the Steelworkers' campaign against Bridgestone/Firestone⁶⁴.

Despite the early momentum, the Sweeney administration's continued financial support to Democratic Party campaigns and limited

⁶⁰ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

⁶¹ Turner and Hurd, "Building Social Movement Unionism. Rekindling the Movement: Labor's Quest for Relevance in the Twenty-First Century."

⁶² Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy*; Waterman, "Social-Movement Unionism: A New Union Model for a New World Order?"

⁶³ Waterman, "Social-Movement Unionism: A New Union Model for a New World Order?"; WERN, *U.S. Workers' Organizing Efforts and Collective Actions* (Worker Empowerment Research Network (WERN), 2022).

⁶⁴ Kate Bronfenbrenner, ed., *Global Unions*, 1st ed. (Cornell University Press, 2007), JSTOR.

internal reforms curtailed the transformative potential of SMU. Union density continued to decline, signaling a structural barrier to its consolidation⁶⁵. In parallel, corporate campaign strategies began to gain institutional support through newly established research centers. Although proponents like Bronfenbrenner and Hickey⁶⁶ argued that these should be coupled with grassroots mobilization, in practice, the absence of rank-and-file engagement drew heavy criticism. McAlevey⁶⁷ contends that without mass participation, such strategies risked replicating the managerial logic of business unionism.

These global and local experiences of SMU provide a crucial analytical lens through which to understand the emergence and trajectory of the PSTU. By centering its strategy on grassroots mobilization, coalition-building, and politicized demands, PSTU embodies many core principles of SMU while negotiating the unique challenges posed by Turkey's authoritarian neoliberal context.

2.3.3 *Corporate Campaigns as Tactical Innovation within SMU*

Within the broader repertoire of SMU, corporate campaigns emerged as tactical innovations designed to confront transnational corporations beyond the shop floor. Though oriented primarily toward the market pole, these campaigns also leverage societal pressure through strategic research, brand attacks, public mobilization, NGO alliances, and "name and shame" strategies⁶⁸.

Traditional tactics like strikes became less effective under neoliberalism, as capital mobility and legal constraints weakened unions' ability to

⁶⁵ Turner and Hurd, "Building Social Movement Unionism. Rekindling the Movement: Labor's Quest for Relevance in the Twenty-First Century."

⁶⁶ Kate Bronfenbrenner and Robert Hickey, "Changing to Organize," *Rebuilding Labor*, 2004, 17–61.

⁶⁷ McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*.

⁶⁸ "Ruth Milkman L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement . New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 2006"; Bronfenbrenner, *Global Unions*.

pressure employers at the workplace⁶⁹. In response, SMU-oriented unions adopted corporate campaigns to target employers' vulnerabilities—such as reputation, investor relations, and regulatory dependencies—thus applying pressure from outside the factory gates.

The AFL-CIO's New Voice leadership promoted such campaigns to counter global corporate power. These strategies involved forming alliances with NGOs, religious institutions, and advocacy groups, conducting in-depth research on corporate structures, and coordinating transnational pressure. The Royal Dutch/Shell boycott during apartheid—led by unions such as UMWA and NUM—exemplified the potential of global solidarity to pressure both corporations and authoritarian regimes.

The corporate campaign strategy emphasizes that for a union to succeed, it must possess a deep understanding of a company and its industry. This requires strategic research to grasp power dynamics, ownership structures, and vulnerabilities⁷⁰. Dedicated union research departments are essential for this analysis, enabling unions to identify leverage points and formulate effective critiques⁷¹. This method moves beyond traditional organizing and bargaining, empowering unions to exert pressure in creative and diverse ways.

Juravich⁷² situates corporate campaigns within a historical continuum of tactical adaptation. Earlier examples include the IWW's simple strike in 1912 and the UAW's more sophisticated plant-specific sit-down strikes in the 1930s. In the 1980s, globalization necessitated further innovation. The United Steelworkers' campaign against Bridgestone/Firestone is a key example: combining shareholder pressure, public boycotts, civil rights alliances, and international delegations, it demonstrated the potential of multifaceted strategies against global firms.

Both corporate campaigns and SMU share the conviction that union power must extend beyond the workplace and engage broader social

⁶⁹ Kim Voss, "Same as It Ever Was? New Labor, the CIO Organizing Model, and the Future of American Unions*," *Politics & Society* 43, no. 3 (2015): 453–57.

⁷⁰ Juravich, "Beating Global Capital:"

⁷¹ K. Bronfenbrenner, "Unions Turn to Global Campaigns," *Democratic Left*, 2016.

⁷² Juravich, "Beating Global Capital:"

forces. Both rely heavily on strategic research and coalition building. Yet, they differ in scope and orientation. Corporate campaigns primarily target market outcomes—such as union recognition or contract improvements—through legal and reputational pressure. These campaigns are often staff-driven and instrumentalist⁷³, focusing on tactical victories rather than systemic transformation. In contrast, SMU promotes bottom-up mobilization and broad societal alliances to pursue class-based and transformative goals. Still, hybrid approaches are increasingly common, combining corporate research with grassroots organizing to confront neoliberalism more effectively⁷⁴.

Despite some high-profile successes, corporate campaigns have not reversed union decline⁷⁵. Critics argue that their professionalized, technocratic nature sidelines rank-and-file participation and prioritizes market-based gains as business unionism⁷⁶. Without deeper organizing, these efforts risk becoming defensive and symbolic rather than generative of structural worker power. While the PSTU does not employ corporate campaigns in the U.S. sense, its use of public shaming, legal complaint networks, and strategic media tactics reflects similar efforts to exert pressure beyond the workplace. These parallels—and their limitations—will be further explored in Chapter 4.

§ 2.4 New Organizational Forms: Worker-to-Worker Organizing and Worker Centers

The past two decades have witnessed a growing interest in organizational forms that operate outside the traditional frameworks of formal unions. As structural pressures like informality, legal restrictions, and high worker turnover have eroded the reach of conventional collective bargaining, workers have begun to explore alternative methods to

⁷³ McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*.

⁷⁴ Bronfenbrenner and Hickey, “Changing to Organize.”

⁷⁵ Jake Rosenfeld, *What Unions No Longer Do* (Harvard University Press, 2014), JSTOR.

⁷⁶ McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*; Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy*.

sustain labor mobilization. In place of institution-led campaigns, bottom-up strategies have gained prominence—often initiated by workers themselves or rooted in community networks. These approaches reflect a broader rethinking of where and how collective power is built: not solely within formal workplace structures, but also through interpersonal relationships, social alliances, and localized infrastructures of resistance. This section explores two such innovations: first, Eric Blanc’s⁷⁷ “worker-to-worker” model, which emphasizes peer-led organizing in repressive legal environments; and second, the rise of worker centers and digital platforms, which extend the logic of grassroots organizing into the realm of community support and political advocacy. Together, these forms challenge traditional assumptions about union power and offer new strategies for labor revitalization under neoliberal and authoritarian constraints.

2.4.1 *Worker-to-Worker Organizing as Strategic Innovation*

Building on the broader shift toward grassroots organizing, Eric Blanc’s worker-to-worker model⁷⁸ offers a compelling alternative to staff-driven or institutionally anchored union strategies. Developed through a close analysis of the 2018–2019 strike wave among U.S. teachers—particularly in red states where union rights are severely restricted—Blanc’s framework demonstrates how insurgent labor movements can emerge and thrive even in the absence of strong union infrastructure. His model is rooted in the lived practices of rank-and-file educators who, often without formal positions or protections, became the architects of large-scale collective action by organizing their coworkers through trust-based, relational networks.

At the core of this model lies the belief that organizing begins not with institutional resources or external staff, but with the agency of ordinary

⁷⁷ Blanc, *We Are the Union: How Worker-to-Worker Organizing Is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big*.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

workers. These workers—who Blanc⁷⁹ describes as “organic leaders”—build credibility through day-to-day interactions and shared experiences on the job. Their influence emerges not from formal authority but from peer recognition and a demonstrated willingness to take risks. Through structured conversations, ongoing mentorship, and relational mapping, these leaders activate their colleagues not just for specific actions but for long-term collective empowerment. Rather than merely mobilizing the already-committed, the strategy prioritizes turning the hesitant and apolitical into active participants—a transformation achieved through persistent one-on-one engagement rather than charismatic appeals.

What makes Blanc’s⁸⁰ contribution particularly innovative is its adaptability to hostile legal environments. In “right-to-work” states, where union recognition is difficult and dues collection is voluntary, organizing cannot depend on legal frameworks, official bargaining units, or employer neutrality. Instead, worker-to-worker organizing treats the union not as an external entity but as a horizontal, living network of solidarity forged through informal relationships. Organizing meetings are held off-hours, in private homes or online spaces; messaging circulates through social media and encrypted chat groups; strike readiness is built incrementally, through cumulative trust and emotional connection. In this sense, the union becomes a social form—a self-organized infrastructure of resistance embedded in everyday life.

This orientation shares important similarities with the strategic path pursued by the PSTU. In its early stages, the union lacked formal recognition or workplace bargaining power. Yet, like the teacher insurgents studied by Blanc⁸¹, PSTU organizers built strength through bottom-up methods: identifying respected teachers in each school, conducting one-on-one conversations, and expanding action capacity through informal networks. Especially during the sit-in and inspection campaigns, the reliance on semi-clandestine, relational organizing enabled the union to mobilize widely without centralized command structures. PSTU’s organizers often

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

acted as facilitators of collective deliberation rather than top-down decision-makers, embodying the kind of rank-and-file initiative central to Blanc's⁸² model.

Positioned at the class pole of Hyman's strategic triangle, the worker-to-worker model enforces the labor struggle with the large-scale and autonomous participation of the rank-and-file that sustains it. It locates power not in institutional legitimacy or political lobbying, but in the capacity of workers to activate each other and act collectively despite legal repression. Compared to similar bottom-up approaches like McAlevey's "whole-worker"⁸³ method, Blanc's framework places greater emphasis on decentralized initiative and organizing in legally adversarial contexts.

Ultimately, Blanc's model reframes union revitalization as a process of relational transformation. It centers workers as both the subjects and architects of their own struggles, advancing a vision of unionism that is insurgent, peer-led, and socially embedded. This vision closely parallels the PSTU's organizing trajectory, which has similarly relied on horizontal trust networks, political activation of ordinary members, and sustained peer-based mobilization in a repressive legal regime.

Yet despite its transformative potential, the worker-to-worker model—like other grassroots approaches—faces important limits when applied to the most precarious, informal, or socially excluded segments of the labor force. Sectors with high turnover, legal ambiguity, and linguistic or migratory barriers often lack even the minimal workplace cohesion needed for peer-to-peer organizing. As such, strategies that rely on trust-based interpersonal networks may falter where employment itself is irregular, invisible, or heavily surveilled. It is precisely in these settings that worker centers and other community-based initiatives have gained traction. Emerging outside the bounds of traditional unions, these organizations build power not primarily through formal recognition or contract bargaining, but through community-rooted support, legal advocacy, and political organizing. While they differ structurally from both

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*.

conventional unions and peer-led strike networks, they respond to the same core need: enabling collective action under conditions of neoliberal exclusion. The next section explores the rise of these class pole oriented formations and considers how they intersect with the broader trajectory of labor revitalization.

2.4.2 *Class Pole Oriented Innovations: From Worker Centers to Digital Platforms*

One of the most significant responses to the dual crisis of union legitimacy and the rise of precarious labor has been the emergence of worker centers—community-based institutions that support and organize low-wage workers, particularly immigrants and those excluded from traditional legal protections⁸⁴. These organizations diverge from conventional unions in that they rarely engage in collective bargaining or seek legal union status. Instead, they pursue local mobilization, community alliances, service provision, and policy advocacy as mechanisms of building worker power⁸⁵.

Early examples like the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association (CSWA) and the Workplace Project emerged in response to the failure of mainstream unions to represent immigrant workers in New York. CSWA, founded in 1979, criticized the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE) for neglecting Chinese workers, and instead built its own organization based on legal support clinics, grassroots mobilization,

⁸⁴ J.R. Fine, *Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream* (Cornell University Press, 2006); Milkman, "Introduction: Toward a New Labor Movement? Organizing New York City's Precariat."

⁸⁵ J. Gordon, *Suburban Sweatshops: The Fight for Immigrant Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); P.Y. Chen, "The 'Isolation' of New York City Chinatown: A Geo-Historical Approach to a Chinese Community in the United States" (PhD diss., City University of New York Graduate Center, 2003).

and anti-racist advocacy⁸⁶. Similarly, the Workplace Project, launched in 1992, focused on Central American day laborers and domestic workers, deliberately eschewing formal union strategies in favor of empowering workers through participatory organizing⁸⁷.

Though initially disconnected from union structures, worker centers have grown significantly—from four in 1992 to over 200 by the 2010s—often forging tactical partnerships with unions after the AFL-CIO formally encouraged organizing immigrant workers⁸⁸. These collaborations allowed unions to tap into new constituencies and repertoires of community-based action, while worker centers gained access to funding and political leverage. Yet this relationship was not without tension; traditional unions often sought to contain the militancy of these organizations to preserve institutional ties with employers and the state⁸⁹.

Worker centers are the innovative and non-union examples of class pole of union strategy since they emphasize class antagonism between laborers from intersectional identities and the capital, engaging in multi-issue organizing that links labor to broader struggles around immigration, housing, healthcare, and racial justice. For instance, Make the Road New York simultaneously offers legal aid, education services, and housing support, while maintaining a worker organizing wing—blurring the line between social movement and labor organization⁹⁰.

⁸⁶ P. Kwong, “Chinese Staff and Workers’ Association: A Model for Organizing in the Changing Economy?,” *Social Policy* 25, no. 2 (1994): 30–38; Chen, “The ‘Isolation’ of New York City Chinatown: A Geo-Historical Approach to a Chinese Community in the United States.”

⁸⁷ Gordon, *Suburban Sweatshops: The Fight for Immigrant Rights*.

⁸⁸ Milkman, “Introduction: Toward a New Labor Movement? Organizing New York City’s Precariat.”

⁸⁹ J.D. Broxmeyer and E. Michaels, “Faith, Community, and Labor: Challenges and Opportunities in the New York City Living Wage Campaign,” in *New Labor in New York: Precarious Workers and the Future of the Labor Movement*, ed. R. Milkman and E. Ott (Cornell University Press, 2014), 70–87.

⁹⁰ J. McAlevey, “The High-Touch Model: Make the Road New York’s Participatory Approach to Immigrant Organizing,” in *New Labor in New York: Precarious Workers and the Future of the Labor Movement*, ed. R. Milkman and E. Ott (Cornell University Press, 2014), 173–86.

What distinguishes many successful worker centers is their bottom-up orientation, participatory democracy, and emphasis on community leadership. These features echo the worker-to-worker strategy emphasized by Blanc⁹¹, wherein informal leadership, mutual aid, and collective action arise not through institutional channels, but through relationships and grassroots networks. Like Blanc's examples, worker centers often operate without legal recognition yet still exercise meaningful power in shaping public discourse and confronting employers.

This strategic convergence is further illustrated by campaigns such as bargaining for the common good, in which unions—particularly in public education—have allied with parents, faith groups, and local communities to frame their demands as collective social goods. These efforts not only amplify legitimacy but also generate new forms of worker identity rooted in social responsibility rather than mere contractual exchange⁹².

The rise of digital organizing platforms has added another layer to this shift toward class-rooted strategies. Coworker.org, founded in 2013, enables decentralized petition campaigns and collective demands without union intermediaries. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the platform experienced a surge in activity, especially among workers in tech, retail, and service sectors, addressing issues such as paid leave, hazard pay, and surveillance⁹³. Coworker.org offers digital infrastructure—communication tools, signature-gathering software, and training resources—allowing dispersed workers to build horizontal workplace networks.

These efforts resemble digital variants of the worker-to-worker strategy: informal, decentralized, and reliant on trust and mutual reinforcement rather than institutional authority. Although they rarely lead to formal unionization, they demonstrate an ability to organize in hostile legal

⁹¹ Blanc, *We Are the Union: How Worker-to-Worker Organizing Is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big*.

⁹² WERN, *U.S. Workers' Organizing Efforts and Collective Actions*.

⁹³ Ibid.

environments and mobilize community support, especially when embedded in larger advocacy coalitions⁹⁴.

Some initiatives have evolved further, combining technological tools with systemic campaigns. United for Respect (UFR)—initially OUR Walmart—mobilizes retail workers around racial equity, scheduling reform, and corporate accountability. Though it emerged from union backing (UFCW), it has since adopted a hybrid model combining advocacy, digital organizing, and public campaigns, securing gains such as severance protections and policy reforms⁹⁵.

These experiments are not limited to the U.S. In Central and Eastern Europe, non-union worker organizations have emerged to organize precarious and gig workers through political action and digital platforms, signaling a global turn toward flexible, class-rooted labor forms⁹⁶.

Despite their achievements, most of these initiatives face significant limitations. They remain fragmented, underfunded, and often lack the institutional durability of traditional unions. While strikes led by nonunion workers are on the rise—87 of the 260 strikes tracked in 2021 were non-union-led—they tend to be smaller in scale and more vulnerable to employer retaliation⁹⁷. Nevertheless, their symbolic and strategic significance is undeniable: they represent an expanding repertoire of worker action that goes beyond the workplace and legal recognition.

In sum, worker centers and digital platforms represent class-oriented extensions of the worker-to-worker organizing model. They respond to

⁹⁴ K. Andrias and B. Sachs, “NDWA-Handy Pilot: Major Gains for Workers Long Excluded from Labor Law’s Protections,” *June 17* (2021); E. Gould and V. Wilson, “Black Workers Face Two of the Most Lethal Preexisting Conditions for Coronavirus—Racism and Economic Inequality. Economic Policy Institute,” 2020.

⁹⁵ McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*.

⁹⁶ M. Bernaciak and A. Trif, “Multiple Strategies but Small Gains: Trade Union Revitalization and Power Resources in Central Eastern Europe after 2008,” *European Journal of Industrial Relations* 29, no. 1 (2023): 83–102; S. Borbely et al., “Trade Union Strategies towards Platform Workers: Exploration Instead of Action (The Case of Hungarian Trade Unions,” 2021.

⁹⁷ J. Kallas et al., *Labor Action Tracker 2022 Annual Report* (School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR), 2022).

legal exclusion and precariousness by forging community-rooted power, cultivating organic leaders among marginalized groups, and emphasizing relational organizing over formal procedures. While not a substitute for unionization, these forms point to new possibilities for labor revitalization under authoritarian neoliberal conditions. Their resonance with the PSTU's strategy—especially in mobilizing unorganized workers, leveraging informal networks, and linking demands to social justice—offers valuable lessons for union innovation in Turkey and beyond.

§ 2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has traced the historical and theoretical evolution of labor organizing strategies through Hyman's strategic triangle, from early militant unionism anchored in the class pole, to postwar institutionalization along the market and society poles, and finally to the emergence of class-oriented innovations in response to neoliberal restructuring. It has illustrated how different strategic orientations—ranging from syndicalism and social movement unionism to corporate campaigns, worker-to-worker organizing, and worker centers—have developed as unions responded to shifting structural constraints and opportunities.

These strategic models offer not only a typology of union behavior but also reveal enduring tensions between militancy and institutionalization, centralization and decentralization, bargaining and transformation. The chapter has shown how grassroots experimentation—especially through relational and class-rooted approaches—has become increasingly central to revitalization efforts in hostile environments. In particular, Eric Blanc's worker-to-worker organizing model and the rise of worker centers highlight alternative logics of power that bypass formal structures in favor of peer networks, community alliances, and democratic agency.

In the context of this dissertation, these theoretical debates provide the analytical tools for understanding the strategic choices and organizing practices of the PSTU. Drawing on Hyman's framework, the thesis conceptualizes PSTU's approach as one that positions itself at the class

pole, rejecting state-mediated compromise and legal formalism in favor of direct action, rank-and-file initiative, and relational organizing. At the same time, it investigates how PSTU adapts these models to Turkey's increasingly authoritarian neoliberal context, where legal repression and political marginalization pose significant barriers to conventional unionism.

The conceptual frameworks elaborated in this chapter will serve as theoretical lenses in the empirical analysis, helping to evaluate the PSTU's organizational repertoire, coalition-building strategies, and political narratives. Rather than treating these strategies as mere reactions, the thesis approaches them as strategic innovations shaped by both global labor theory and local constraints. This theoretical grounding will enable a critical assessment of the possibilities and limits of grassroots unionism as a viable alternative in authoritarian neoliberal regimes.

Neoliberal Transformation, Contraction of the Union Field, and Strategic Possibilities in Turkey

This chapter provides a historical and analytical examination of the transformation of labor-state relations and the reconfiguration of the union field in Turkey, spanning from the late Ottoman period to the 2020s. In doing so, it explores the formation of neoliberal hegemony as a politically constructed, ideologically mediated, and institutionally embedded project. Neoliberalism is understood not merely as a set of market-oriented reforms but as a broader political-economic and class-based restructuring of social relations, mediated by the state and reinforced through mechanisms of authoritarian governance. The strategic disorganization of labor, the legal and institutional narrowing of union rights, and the emergence of new forms of control over the workforce were shown to be constitutive elements of this hegemonic process.

Against this backdrop, Chapter 3 shifts the focus to the historical evolution of labor and union politics in Turkey, with the aim of understanding how different institutional and political moments have shaped the terrain on which contemporary labor struggles unfold. Drawing on

Hyman's¹ strategic orientation framework, which conceptualizes trade union orientations along the axes of class, market, and society, this chapter maps the ways in which unions have navigated shifting structural constraints and political opportunities across distinct historical conjunctures. Rather than adopting a static or normative account of union decline, the analysis here is attentive to the contradictory and contested nature of union strategies, which have at times reproduced domination and at other times opened up avenues for class-based resistance.

The chapter is organized into three main sections. The first section traces the historical trajectory of labor and the state from the late Ottoman Empire to the 1980 military coup, highlighting the legacies of statist control, legal paternalism, and class containment that shaped early unionism. The second section turns to the post-1980 period, marked by military intervention, the institutionalization of neoliberal reforms, and the fragmentation of organized labor. This period witnessed the rise of yellow unionism, the marginalization of combative traditions, and the emergence of new, often contradictory, union strategies under conditions of increasing precarity and flexibilization. The final section examines the consolidation of authoritarian neoliberalism under the rule of the AKP, focusing on how labor law reforms, regulatory restructuring, and state repression have intensified the closure of the union field while also incubating new contradictions and tensions. Throughout the chapter, special attention is given to how unions, both established and emergent, have responded to these transformations—not only in terms of formal strategies but also through their embeddedness in broader class relations and their capacity to articulate social alternatives.

By reconstructing the historical development of union strategies across these three periods, this chapter sets the empirical and analytical foundation for understanding the rise of grassroots labor mobilization and independent unionism in the 2020s, especially PSTU's which will be investigated in the next chapters.

¹ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

§ 3.1 Historical Trajectory of Labor and the State in Turkey: From the Late Ottoman Period to 1980

This section traces the historical trajectory of labor and state relations in Turkey from the late Ottoman period to the military coup of 1980. Rather than treating the emergence of organized labor as a linear or inevitable process, it emphasizes the contingent and uneven nature of class formation shaped by imperial decline, state-led modernization, and political repression. It begins with the structural fragmentation of the Ottoman labor field, marked by ethno-religious segmentation, legal constraints, and the persistence of guild-based hierarchies. It then explores how the early Republican regime suppressed independent labor activity in pursuit of a "classless society" and subordinated workers to the goals of national development. In the post-World War II period, labor relations were restructured in line with Cold War geopolitics and liberal economic integration, giving rise to both institutional reforms and militant worker mobilizations. Across these distinct phases, the chapter identifies persistent patterns of exclusion, coercion, and state control that prevented the consolidation of autonomous, class-oriented labor organizations. By highlighting these continuities, the section provides a historical foundation for understanding the structural weaknesses and strategic dilemmas that unions would confront in the neoliberal era beginning in the 1980s.

3.1.1 *Late Ottoman Roots: Guild Decline, Early Worker Associations*

The emergence of a capitalist social structure in the Ottoman Empire, though partial and uneven, began in the 19th century under conditions of imperial decline and external dependency. The integration of the Ottoman economy into global capitalism—most notably through capitulations and foreign debt—produced a distorted development path that

hindered autonomous industrialization and working-class formation². Industrial investments were directed toward coastal cities such as Istanbul, Izmir, and Salonika, especially in the textile and military sectors³. However, the 1838 Treaty of Balta Limanı, signed with the United Kingdom, disrupted the local economic balance by granting British merchants equal privileges with domestic traders. The resulting competition stifled the Empire's early industrial efforts and impeded the development of its productive forces⁴.

The treaty not only stalled the development of productive forces but also contributed to the rise of a non-Muslim bourgeoisie, who enjoyed privileges through their organic ties to European capital, their exemption from military service, and favorable trade regimes. This new bourgeois class overwhelmingly dominated industrial capital, particularly in minority-dense regions, laying the foundation for the later ethno-religious segmentation of the working class⁵.

These structural constraints shaped an emerging class configuration marked by ethno-religious segmentation. The expansion of privileges for Western capital enabled the rise of a non-Muslim Ottoman bourgeoisie, who held overwhelming advantages over their Muslim counterparts. These advantages stemmed from their close ties with European capital, exemptions from military service, and access to favorable trade agreements⁶. Efforts to rebalance this uneven development were made after the 1908 Revolution, when the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) adopted a "national economy" strategy aimed at cultivating a Muslim industrial class⁷. By 1915, there were 282 industrial enterprises employing

² E.C. Gürcan and B. Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

³ M.Ş. Güzel, *İşçi Tarihine Bakmak* (Istanbul: Sosyal Tarih Yayinlari, 2007), 56.

⁴ Güzel, *İşçi Tarihine Bakmak*, 56; Koç, *Türkiye İşçi Sınıfı Tarihi - Osmanlı'dan 2016'ya Özet*, 63-64.

⁵ Güzel, *İşçi Tarihine Bakmak*, 56; Gürcan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

⁶ Gürcan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

⁷ Ibid.

nearly 15,000 workers, primarily in the textile and food industries and largely owned by non-Muslim capitalists⁸. These efforts, however, were soon disrupted by the Balkan Wars and World War I.

The emergence of worker organization in the Ottoman Empire followed a similarly uneven trajectory. From the 1860s onward, early forms of labor association appeared, including mutual aid societies, workers' committees, and machine-breaking protests. The Amelepervver Cemiyeti, established in 1871, was the first labor organization resembling a modern union. It was followed by strikes in Kasımpaşa shipyards (1872) and among Beyoğlu telegraph workers (1873), and later a dramatic rise in strike activity after the 1908 Revolution, with 111 strikes recorded that year alone⁹. Strikes in foreign-owned firms were initially tolerated or even supported by the CUP but were later curtailed as the regime prioritized the national economy¹⁰.

Despite these developments, the institutional landscape for worker organizing remained highly constrained. The long-dominant guild system left a deep imprint on labor relations, preserving hierarchical and paternalistic relations between employers and workers. Though formally abolished in 1908, guild structures were effectively reproduced through Craftsmen's Associations, which continued to bind masters and apprentices within the same corporatist body¹¹. Semi-unionist organizations such as the Ekmekçi Esnafı Amele Cemiyeti, legalized under the 1909 Regulation on Craftsmen's Associations, emerged in this period, yet their capacity for independent class action was severely limited by legal restrictions and cultural loyalty to craft masters.

⁸ Tokol, *Türkiye'de Sendikal Hareket*; Toprak, *İttihad-Terakki ve Cihan Harbi: Savaş Ekonomisi ve Türkiye'de Devletçilik (1914–1918)*; Mahiroğulları, *Cumhuriyetten Günümüze Türkiye'de İşçi Sendikacılığı*, 3; Koç, *Türkiye İşçi Sınıfı Tarihi - Osmanlı'dan 2016'ya Özet*, 67.

⁹ Gürçan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

¹⁰ Tokol, *Türkiye'de Sendikal Hareket*, 1-5; Güzel, *İşçi Tarihine Bakmak*, 68-69.

¹¹ Gürçan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

Further fragmenting the labor field were the Empire's ethno-political cleavages. Industrial capital was concentrated in non-Muslim communities, and these employers often hired workers from their own ethnic groups, typically at above-average wages¹². Consequently, the Ottoman working class was predominantly composed of non-Muslim laborers, who formed the basis of early union activity. However, their organizations were divided by religious, ethnic, and ideological lines—including socialism, Christianity, and nationalist separatism¹³. These divisions made cross-community solidarity rare and prevented the formation of a unified labor movement. As a result, labor activism remained localized, ideologically fragmented, and politically isolated across industrial centers like Istanbul, Izmir, and Salonika¹⁴.

In sum, while the late Ottoman period witnessed the earliest expressions of labor organization, these efforts were structurally fragmented, legally restricted, and culturally subordinated. Worker associations never acquired the institutional autonomy or class coherence necessary for sustained collective action. Instead, the groundwork was laid for a labor field shaped more by paternalism, ethnic segmentation, and state repression than by collective organization or political incorporation. These early patterns of fragmentation and exclusion would continue to shape the trajectory of labor under the Republican regime.

3.1.2 *Early Republican Period: Nation-Building and Labor Suppression (1923–1945)*

Following the War of Independence and the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the country faced significant demographic and

¹² Güzel, *Türkiye'de İşçi Hareketi Tarihi 1908–1984*, 75, 82; Tokol, *Türkiye'de Sendikal Hareket*, 2–3.

¹³ Tokol, *Türkiye'de Sendikal Hareket*; Ö. Aydar, "Osmanlı Devleti'nde İlk Sosyalizm Tartışmaları ve İlk Sosyalist Örgütlenmeler," *Atatürk Dergisi* 4, no. 2 (2015): 51–81; M. Tunçay and E.J. Zürcher, eds., *Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda Sosyalizm ve Milliyetçilik (1876–1923)* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2014).

¹⁴ Koç, *Türkiye İşçi Sınıfı Tarihi - Osmanlı'dan 2016'ya Özet*, 75.

economic ruptures. The population had fallen from 15.4 million in 1913 to 13.5 million by 1927 due to war losses and population exchanges¹⁵. The working class was small and fragmented, and industrial infrastructure was severely weakened.

The new regime under the Republican People's Party (CHP) adopted a centralized modernization strategy while discouraging independent labor organization in the name of building a "classless society"¹⁶. Laws such as the 1925 Law on the Maintenance of Order and the 1938 Law on Associations restricted political and organizational space for workers¹⁷.

In the absence of a strong private sector, the state initiated large-scale nationalization efforts in sectors like banking, railways, and communications. However, this did not lead to labor empowerment. In 1923, the industrial workforce totaled only 111,950 to 114,400 people, and industrial employment accounted for just 4.6% of total employment in 1924¹⁸. The 1927 industrial survey showed 65,245 enterprises employing 256,855 workers, nearly half in agriculture. Over 70% of these businesses employed fewer than three workers, while large enterprises were confined to a few urban centers¹⁹.

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¹⁵ Gürcan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Tokol, *Türkiye'de Sendikal Hareket*, 17, 19–21.

¹⁸ Güzel, *Türkiye'de İşçi Hareketi Tarihi 1908–1984*, 127.

¹⁹ Mahiroğulları, *Cumhuriyetten Günümüze Türkiye'de İşçi Sendikacılığı*, 32–33; Tokol, *Türkiye'de Sendikal Hareket*, 15.

²⁰ Güzel, *Türkiye'de İşçi Hareketi Tarihi 1908–1984*, 127.

employed fewer than three workers, while large enterprises were confined to a few urban centers²¹.

After the 1929 Great Depression, state-led industrialization accelerated with the First Five-Year Industrial Plan of 1932, drafted with Soviet assistance²². It focused on import-substitution in sectors such as petrochemicals, iron, cement, and armament. To reduce regional disparities, investments were directed to underdeveloped areas like Kayseri and Diyarbakır alongside the main hubs of Istanbul and İzmir²³. The industrial sector's share of GDP rose from 10% in 1930 to 14.6% in 1940²⁴. Yet this expansion did not foster worker organization. Political constraints, small firm size, and the absence of formal labor rights limited the development of trade unions. There were no autonomous unions capable of negotiating wages, building class identity, or embedding themselves in broader social struggles.

During World War II, the government shifted priorities to military spending and rationing under the Economic Defense Plan, halting further industrial expansion. The industrial sector's share of GDP fell to 13.1% by 1950²⁵.

In sum, while the early Republican period witnessed limited structural development of the working class, it lacked any institutional or political expression. Labor was systematically excluded from public life, as independent organizing was suppressed in favor of a corporatist vision of a classless, harmonious society. The dominance of a single-party regime, the absence of formal labor rights, and the prevalence of small-scale, geographically dispersed production units inhibited the emergence of collective worker identity and class-based strategies. Even as

²¹ Mahiroğulları, *Cumhuriyetten Günümüze Türkiye'de İşçi Sendikacılığı*, 32–33; Tokol, *Türkiye'de Sendikal Hareket*, 15.

²² Kipal and Uyanık, *Türkiye Milli İktisat Tarihi*, 120–123.

²³ Güzel, *Türkiye'de İşçi Hareketi Tarihi 1908–1984*, 127.

²⁴ M.B. Ekinci, "Türkiye'de 1923–2006 Döneminde İktisadi Krizler ve İstatistikler," in *Türkiye'nin Ekonomi Politikası: 1923–2007*, ed. M. Dikkaya et al. (Ankara: Orion Kitabevi, 2008).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

state-led industrialization expanded, it failed to empower labor as an autonomous political actor. This institutional void—characterized by paternalism, repression, and political closure—left lasting imprints on Turkey’s labor regime. It not only delayed the consolidation of class consciousness but also established the structural and ideological barriers that would persist into the postwar period. These constraints would continue to shape both the possibilities and limitations of labor mobilization in the decades that followed.

3.1.3 *Post-WWII Liberalization and the Rise of Labor Mobilization (1946–1980)*

The aftermath of World War II marked a turning point in Turkey’s labor history, as the authoritarian repression of the early Republican period gradually gave way to a new, albeit limited, space for labor mobilization. While the Cold War alignment with the Western bloc and access to Marshall Plan aid facilitated economic liberalization and infrastructural development, these reforms also generated new contradictions within Turkey’s emerging industrial order. The transition to multi-party politics, the creation of formal union structures, and rising social unrest laid the groundwork for the re-emergence of organized labor as a political actor. This period witnessed both the institutionalization of labor rights and the proliferation of militant workplace struggles, culminating in a fragmented but dynamic labor movement. The following section explores how structural transformations and growing class conflict shaped the repertoire of union strategies leading up to the 1980 military coup.

Following the Second World War, Turkey’s developmental trajectory shifted in alignment with the global capitalist reconfiguration shaped by the Cold War. As the United States emerged as the dominant global power, Turkey aligned itself with the Western bloc and gained access to Marshall Plan aid. This support facilitated agricultural modernization and infrastructure development, including investments in highways and dams²⁶.

²⁶ Mahiroğulları, *Cumhuriyetten Günümüze Türkiye’de İşçi Sendikacılığı*, 47.

In exchange, Turkey adopted a liberal economic framework and initiated a transition to multi-party politics. However, leftist trade unions remained targets of state repression throughout this process²⁷.

The Democrat Party (DP), which came to power in 1950, promoted liberalization through import-led growth policies²⁸. These policies, however, failed to address regional inequality. By 1943, over half of the industrial workforce was concentrated in Istanbul, Izmir, and Zonguldak²⁹. The liberal economic orientation led to growing trade deficits, foreign exchange shortages, and rising social unrest. As student protests and labor agitation intensified, the DP responded with increasing authoritarianism. DP also facilitated the creation of TÜRK-İŞ in 1952, the country's first national union confederation, as a strategy to consolidate political control over labor. The political tensions culminated in the 1960 military coup³⁰.

In the coup's aftermath, Turkey adopted a state-led developmental model based on import substitution industrialization (ISI), reflecting broader global trends³¹. Institutional reforms enabled this shift, and by 1963, Five-Year Development Plans were reintroduced alongside expanded public incentives³². These efforts spurred rapid industrialization, with the industrial sector's share of GDP rising from 14.7% in 1955 to 20.6% in 1975. Real daily wages increased by nearly 390%, and the industrial workforce grew by 349%³³.

There was an inter-dependent relationship between the structural transformation and worker mobilization of that period. While structural

²⁷ Tokol, *Türkiye'de Sendikal Hareket*, 22–24.

²⁸ Gürçan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

²⁹ Güzel, *Türkiye'de İşçi Hareketi Tarihi 1908–1984*, 127–128.

³⁰ Pamuk, *Türkiye'nin 200 Yıllık İktisadi Tarihi*, 232–234; Boratav, *Türkiye İktisat Tarihi 1908–2009*; Eroğul, *Demokrat Parti: Tarihi ve İdeolojisi*, 154–161.

³¹ C. Bina and B. Yaghmaian, "Post-War Global Accumulation and the Transnationalisation of Capital," *Capital & Class* 15, no. 1 (1991): 107–30.

³² Güneş, "The Political Foundations of Economic Crises and the Economic Foundations of Political Crises; the Intermingling Relationship: Turkish Case 1950–2002", 36–37; Algül, *Türkiyede Sendika Siyaset İlişkisi: Disk (1967-1975)*, 58–60.

³³ Ekinci, "Türkiye'de 1923–2006 Döneminde İktisadi Krizler ve İstatistikler."

improvements encouraged the emergence of worker mobilization, militant struggle of workers forced political power to take steps towards improvements. The 1961 Saraçhane Rally, which brought together over 100,000 workers to demand implementation of constitutional labor rights, marked the first major public demonstration of class-based solidarity³⁴. The 1963 Kavel Resistance further illustrated workers' growing capacity for autonomous organization, as workers occupied the cable factory in protest of anti-union repression and benefit cuts³⁵. These events culminated in legislative reforms that granted the right to strike and bargain collectively, reflecting the increasing strength of labor's political presence.

The 1960s also witnessed the 85-day strike at the Paşabahçe glassware factory, where 2,400 workers organized against low wages and harsh conditions. Their tactics included marches, press campaigns, and symbolic protests rooted in neighborhood and occupational ties, building a shared identity that transcended workplace divisions. However, internal cleavages—shaped by craft-based particularism and regional loyalties—also revealed the contradictions within class formation³⁶. These struggles contributed to the evolution of a militant and politically conscious labor movement, laying the groundwork for organizational innovation. Factory occupations, such as those at the Derby Tire Factory in 1968 and the Alpagut Lignite Mine in 1969, further pushed the boundaries of labor militancy. In both cases, workers engaged in workplace takeovers, self-management, and direct democracy to resist employer repression and union co-optation³⁷. These actions marked significant steps in class-based organizing, demonstrating an advanced repertoire of contention.

³⁴ M.H. Koçak and A. Çelik, "Türkiye İşçi Sınıfının Ayağa Kalktığı Gün: Saraçhane Mitingi," *Çalışma ve Toplum* 2, no. 49 (2016): 647–78.

³⁵ Evrensel, "Kavel Direnişi," 2007.

³⁶ H. Koçak, "Camın İşçileri Paşabahçe İşçilerinin Sınıf Olma Öyküsü," *Ankara:İletişim*, 2014.

³⁷ Evrensel, "Derby Lastik Fabrikası işgali," 2007; Ö. Narin, "Alpagut Olayı," 2011; Kızıl-Bayrak, "Derby Lastik Fabrikası işgali deneyimi ışığında," 2016.

The 1970s opened with the dramatic events of June 15–16, when over 100,000 workers mobilized to protest state attempts to curtail union pluralism. These protests, backed by DİSK and supported by broader labor and student movements, ended in violent repression but also signaled the arrival of labor as a mass political actor³⁸. In the latter half of the decade, DİSK continued to lead mass mobilizations, culminating in the 1977–1980 MESS strikes. These strikes, while formally rooted in collective bargaining disputes, encompassed demands for political freedoms, democratic reforms, and symbolic recognition of May Day as a workers' holiday³⁹. This politicization of industrial struggle indicated a growing fusion between class interests and broader democratic aspirations.

Viewed through Hyman's⁴⁰ framework, the proliferation of strikes, factory occupations, and symbolic mobilizations between 1960 and 1980 not only reflected the maturation of a proletarian identity but also signaled union strategy that abandoning passive negotiation and embracing assertive "class" confrontation. The historical trajectory of the Turkish labor movement during this period reveals how organizational experimentation and collective action enabled workers to craft new repertoires of struggle—repertoires that reshaped both their internal capacities and their strategic horizons. During this period, there was a tendency towards militancy in the unions and the working class, as well as a tendency towards class pole.

When examining the activities of Turkish trade union confederations, Türk-İş and DİSK, up to 1980, distinct strategic orientations emerge. Türk-İş, established in 1952 during the DP government, served as the first national trade union confederation. It was instrumental in solidifying the DP's political hegemony and suppressing opposition. Despite its claim of "above-party politics," Türk-İş cultivated close ties with various right-wing parties. In this context, it is appropriate to primarily position Türk-İş within Hyman's⁴¹ framework as a "social integration partner" and, to a

³⁸ Mahiroğulları, *Cumhuriyetten Günümüze Türkiye'de İşçi Sendikacılığı*, 228–241.

³⁹ Şafak, "MESS Grevleri (1977–1980)."

⁴⁰ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

⁴¹ Ibid.

limited extent, a "market bargainer." The union sought legitimacy and influence by collaborating with the existing political and economic system, maintaining a close stance to the state, and favoring consensus over conflict. This approach can also be interpreted as a means of ensuring the survival of trade unionism during a period characterized by limited organizational capacity of the working class and high state repression.

In contrast, DİSK (Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey) was founded in 1967 as a "militant alternative" by workers dissatisfied with Türk-İş's right-wing, pro-government stance and its ties to the United States. DİSK's emergence coincided with a significant politicization of trade union activism and a strengthening of its ties with leftist politics, evidenced by substantial increases in strike participation (1297%) and unionized workers (175%) between 1963 and 1970. Mass actions led by DİSK, such as the June 15-16, 1970 events and the 1977-1980 MESS strikes, demonstrate that the trade union struggle transcended mere economic demands to embrace a political and class-conscious character. These actions position DİSK much closer to Hyman's "class" pole. DİSK adopted an approach of challenging the existing system rather than compromising with it, utilizing the organizational power of the working class as a tool for transformation, and aiming for broader societal change. This also encompassed a stronger "market bargainer" role, though these negotiations typically served wider political objectives.

Across these three historical phases, the development of labor and state relations in Turkey reveals a persistent pattern of fragmentation, marginalization, and political containment. From the ethno-religious segmentation of the Ottoman working class to the early Republican regime's suppression of class-based organization in favor of state-led modernization, labor relations were shaped more by mechanisms of exclusion and discipline than by institutionalized class conflict. Although the post-1946 period witnessed a growing assertiveness within the labor movement—culminating in the emergence of mass-based unions like DİSK and waves of militant mobilization in the 1970s—these gains remained fragile and contested. State intervention, legal repression, and the uneven structure

of industrialization constrained the consolidation of a unified and durable labor bloc. As such, the pre-1980 period laid not only the foundations for labor militancy but also the structural vulnerabilities that would be exploited and intensified under the neoliberal restructuring that followed. Understanding these historical continuities is crucial for grasping why the working class entered the neoliberal era without cohesive institutional power, and how union strategies were shaped by long-standing tensions between autonomy, incorporation, and coercion.

§ 3.2 1980–2002: Military Rule, Market Liberalization, and the Fragmentation of Union Power

The period between 1980 and 2002 represents a critical juncture in the transformation of Turkey's labor regime. It was during these years that the foundational pillars of the postwar developmentalist state were dismantled, and a new neoliberal order was constructed through the combined force of military repression, legal restructuring, and market liberalization. The 24 January 1980 decrees, swiftly followed by the military coup of 12 September, created the conditions for a radical reorganization of state–labor relations. Under the guise of economic stabilization and export-led growth, sweeping reforms subordinated labor to the imperatives of capital accumulation, while the new constitutional and legal framework institutionalized the depoliticization and fragmentation of trade union power.

This chapter explores the political and economic restructuring of this era alongside the strategic responses it provoked within the labor movement. While the first section (3.2.1) analyzes the legal-institutional architecture of neoliberalism and its material effects on workers—rising precarity, de-unionization, wage erosion, and privatization—the second section (3.2.2) turns to the recomposition of union strategies under these constraints. Through both adaptation and resistance, Turkish unions attempted to navigate an increasingly hostile terrain. Drawing on Hyman's

typology of union strategies—class, market, and society—the chapter investigates how unions oscillated between institutional collaboration, oppositional mobilization, and societal legitimation in response to the authoritarian flexibility imposed by the state. The period closed with a labor movement weakened, fragmented, and increasingly detached from the structural and symbolic capacities that had once made it a political force.

3.2.1 *Economic and Political Restructuring Under Neoliberalism (1980–2002)*

Turkey's economic development has undergone four major transformations since the founding of the Republic in 1923⁴². The final and most consequential began in the 1980s, when the crisis of the import substitution industrialization (ISI) model—exacerbated by the oil crises, foreign debt, and political instability—led to the adoption of neoliberal policies under the 24 January 1980 decrees. Drafted by Turgut Özal, these decrees aimed to liberalize trade, promote export-led growth, and attract foreign capital, marking the beginning of a new era characterized by market fundamentalism⁴³.

This model had become unsustainable due to mounting foreign debt, trade deficits, technological dependence, and the impact of global oil shocks. As GDP growth stalled and political instability intensified, the need for a new development strategy became urgent⁴⁴. The 24 January decrees introduced stabilization and structural adjustment policies that aimed to liberalize trade, promote exports, and attract foreign capital. However, the popular opposition to these reforms rendered them

⁴² F. Şenses, "Turkey's Experience with Neoliberal Policies Since 1980 in Retrospect and Prospect," in *The Making of Neoliberal Turkey*, ed. C. Ozbay et al. (Routledge, 2016).

⁴³ Ibid.; Bozkurt - Güngen, "Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities Under the AKP Governments in Turkey."

⁴⁴ Şenses, "Turkey's Experience with Neoliberal Policies Since 1980 in Retrospect and Prospect"; Bozkurt - Güngen, "Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities Under the AKP Governments in Turkey."

politically unviable—until the military coup of 12 September 1980 created the conditions for their forceful implementation⁴⁵.

The military coup of 12 September 1980 eliminated initial resistance from labor and political actors. The regime suppressed civil society, dissolved DİSK, and targeted the working class through mass arrests, executions, torture, and forced closures of associations⁴⁶. The military permitted only Türk-İş and Hak-İş to remain active, favoring a corporatist and pro-government unionism⁴⁷. Supported by the IMF and World Bank, the military government implemented Washington Consensus policies centered on export-led growth and market liberalization⁴⁸.

Neoliberal transformation also entailed a reconfiguration of state institutions. The State Planning Organization was weakened and economic governance was centralized under the Prime Ministry between 1980 and 1983⁴⁹. A new constitution consolidated executive power and limited political pluralism, reshaping the balance between the legislative and executive branches⁵⁰.

The 1982 Constitution, drafted under military rule, dramatically restructured state-labor relations. It centralized executive power and weakened legislative oversight, while redefining union rights within a restrictive framework⁵¹. The Law on Trade Unions (Law No. 2821) and the Law on Collective Bargaining, Strikes and Lockouts (Law No. 2822)—both

⁴⁵ Gürcan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

⁴⁶ Ibid.; Tokol, *Türkiye’de Sendikal Hareket*.

⁴⁷ Tokol, *Türkiye’de Sendikal Hareket*, 12.

⁴⁸ Akçay, “Revisiting the Rise and Decline of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: A Political Economy Analysis of AKP’s Initial Decade”; Bozkurt - Güngen, “Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities Under the AKP Governments in Turkey”; U. Akçay, “Neoliberal Populism in Turkey and Its Crisis,” *IPE Working Papers* 100 (2018).

⁴⁹ U. Akçay, *Kapitalizmi planlamak: Türkiye’de planlama ve DPT’nin dönüşümü* (İstanbul: Sosyal Araştırmalar Vakfı, 2007); Akçay, “Revisiting the Rise and Decline of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: A Political Economy Analysis of AKP’s Initial Decade.”

⁵⁰ Akçay, “Revisiting the Rise and Decline of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: A Political Economy Analysis of AKP’s Initial Decade.”

⁵¹ Ibid.

enacted in 1983—institutionalized these constitutional constraints. Law No. 2821 introduced high thresholds for union recognition, limiting representation to the majority union within a workplace and requiring a union to organize at least 10% of workers in a given industry nationwide. This system blocked smaller or newly emerging unions from entering the field⁵².

At the same time, sectoral bargaining was outlawed, and firm-level bargaining became the norm. This move fragmented collective bargaining processes and curtailed unions' ability to mobilize industry-wide resistance. Law No. 2822 restricted the right to strike to economic disputes, excluding solidarity strikes, political strikes, and general strikes—forms of collective action that had been crucial during the 1970s labor upsurge. Additionally, the Council of Ministers was granted authority to postpone strikes, a power frequently used to neutralize labor actions under the guise of protecting "national security" or "public order"⁵³.

These legal reforms fundamentally altered the political and structural capacities of trade unions. Not only did they eliminate pluralism within the labor field, but they also reoriented unions away from political engagement, reinforcing a technocratic and economistic model of labor relations. The constitutional ban on union political activity and the prohibition of multiple union membership further curtailed the formation of cross-sectoral alliances and political contestation. Thus, the institutional landscape created by the military regime excluded oppositional unions from representation, favored bureaucratic unionism, and severely limited workers' strategic repertoires⁵⁴.

The government also prioritized trade liberalization and export incentives. The Export Promotion and Implementation Department (EPID) was established to provide financial support and incentives, such as low-

⁵² Bozkurt - Güngen, "Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities Under the AKP Governments in Turkey."

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Tokol, *Türkiye'de Sendikal Hareket*; Gürcan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

interest loans, tax exemptions, and export subsidies⁵⁵. As a result, the export-to-GDP ratio increased from 5.2% in 1980 to 18.6% by 1988⁵⁶, and major conglomerates dominated this sector⁵⁷.

Import liberalization was no less aggressive. The number of liberalized items increased by 150%, and restricted goods declined from 1,800 to 459, with stamp duties reduced from 25% to 1%⁵⁸. Contrary to neoliberal orthodoxy, public spending increased through transfer payments and subsidies to capital⁵⁹.

Monetary policy followed suit. The liberalization of interest rates in 1981, currency devaluation (up to 48%), and the introduction of a daily exchange rate in 1981 were accompanied by the opening of the Istanbul Stock Exchange in 1986 and capital account liberalization in 1989⁶⁰. These reforms deepened financial liberalization but also heightened vulnerability to external shocks and speculative capital movements⁶¹.

Turkey's entry into the EU Customs Union in 1995 cemented this trajectory. While imports from Europe surged, export growth was modest

⁵⁵ Ercan, "Sermaye Birikiminin Çelişkili Sürekliliği: Türkiye'nin Küresel Kapitalizmle Bütünleşme Sürecine Eleştirel Bir Bakış", 22–23; Kırmızıaltın, *Sonrası Türkiye Ekonomisi & Türkiye'nin Neoliberal Dönüşümüne IMF ve Dünya Bankasının Etkisi*; Önder, "Integrating with the Global Market: The State and the Crisis of Political Representation: Turkey in the 1980s and 1990s."

⁵⁶ Gürçan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

⁵⁷ Z. Öniş, "Redemocratization and Economic Liberalization in Turkey: The Limits of State Autonomy," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 27, no. 2 (1992): 3–23.

⁵⁸ Kırmızıaltın, *Sonrası Türkiye Ekonomisi & Türkiye'nin Neoliberal Dönüşümüne IMF ve Dünya Bankasının Etkisi*.

⁵⁹ Önder, "Integrating with the Global Market: The State and the Crisis of Political Representation: Turkey in the 1980s and 1990s"; Gürçan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

⁶⁰ Kırmızıaltın, *Sonrası Türkiye Ekonomisi & Türkiye'nin Neoliberal Dönüşümüne IMF ve Dünya Bankasının Etkisi*; Ş. Pektaş, *Türkiye'de NeoLiberal Yıkım Süreci* (İstanbul: Parşömen, 2014); A.E. Yeldan, *Küreselleşme Sürecinde Türkiye Ekonomisi: Bölüşüm, Birikim ve Büyüme* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2011); Akçay, "Revisiting the Rise and Decline of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: A Political Economy Analysis of AKP's Initial Decade."

⁶¹ Gürçan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

and came with trade deficits, revenue losses, and continued visa restrictions for Turkish citizens. Export-led industrialization focused on low-value-added sectors like textiles, where precarious, low-wage, and unorganized labor was the norm⁶².

While the legal apparatus depoliticized labor, economic restructuring further eroded workers' power. Özal's government pursued aggressive liberalization in trade, finance, and capital markets. State Economic Enterprises (KİTs), which had once employed over 460,000 workers and contributed significantly to industrial output, were dismantled or privatized. Agricultural subsidies were removed, capital accounts were liberalized, and the Istanbul Stock Exchange was established in 1986. Export-oriented industrialization was supported through incentives, tax exemptions, and foreign exchange reforms, while public expenditures increasingly favored private capital⁶³.

Labor bore the brunt of this transformation. The export regime concentrated growth in low-value-added sectors like textiles, where wages were low, job insecurity was rampant, and unionization rates plummeted. Real wages stagnated, especially during crises like those in 1994 and 2001. Even though labor mobilizations such as the 1989 Spring Actions briefly reversed wage erosion, the trend remained downward. From 1993 to 1994 alone, the number of unionized workers fell from over one million to just 227,990⁶⁴.

Privatization played a key role in weakening working-class power. Although slow initially, by 2000 Turkey raised \$8 billion through privatizations—\$2.7 billion in 2000 alone. Public enterprises (KİTs) saw massive

⁶² Pektaş, *Türkiye'de NeoLiberal Yıkım Süreci*; Gürcan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*; Önder, "Integrating with the Global Market: The State and the Crisis of Political Representation: Turkey in the 1980s and 1990s."

⁶³ Kırmızıaltın, *Sonrası Türkiye Ekonomisi & Türkiye'nin Neoliberal Dönüşümüne IMF ve Dünya Bankasının Etkisi*; Önder, "Integrating with the Global Market: The State and the Crisis of Political Representation: Turkey in the 1980s and 1990s"; Akçay, "Revisiting the Rise and Decline of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: A Political Economy Analysis of AKP's Initial Decade."

⁶⁴ Y. Koç, *Türk Sendikal Hareketi ve Çağdaş Misyonerler* (İstanbul: Yayın B, 2010).

layoffs and wage cuts, with union militants often dismissed⁶⁵. Cement factories recorded wage cuts of up to 61% in 1996⁶⁶. These processes facilitated de-unionization and intra-class competition in labor markets.

The 1994 financial crisis further entrenched labor precarity. The brief gains in real wages after the 1989 Spring Actions were reversed, and union membership collapsed from over 1 million in 1993 to under 230,000 in 1994⁶⁷.

In sum, the reorganization of the legal and institutional framework of labor under the 1980 regime was not merely an accessory to neoliberal restructuring—it was its political condition of possibility. Through sweeping constitutional and legislative changes, the military regime and subsequent neoliberal governments engineered a labor regime that prioritized capital mobility, discipline, and political quiescence. The combination of legal repression, economic liberalization, and structural unemployment produced a fragmented and precarious working class, one increasingly disempowered to resist the dictates of the market. Neoliberal restructuring not only reoriented Turkey's economy but also reshaped the balance of class forces, dramatically weakening labor's structural power. These transformations did not merely affect labor's material conditions—they also narrowed the strategic horizon of trade unions, forcing them to operate within a tightly confined institutional field. Under this repressive and depoliticized regime, unions were compelled to reassess their roles and strategies, oscillating between accommodation and resistance. The next section examines how these constraints shaped the strategic orientations of Turkish unions in the face of authoritarian neoliberalism, drawing on Hyman's framework to assess the fragmented and contradictory responses that emerged during this turbulent period.

⁶⁵ Pektaş, *Türkiye'de NeoLiberal Yıkım Süreci*.

⁶⁶ Gürçan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

⁶⁷ Y. Koç, *Türkiye İşçi Sınıfı Tarihi* (Ankara: Epos, 2010).

3.2.2 *Union Strategies and the Recomposition of the Labor Movement (1980–2002)*

The neoliberal transformation imposed in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup did not merely dismantle the institutional infrastructure of organized labor; it also forced trade unions to recalibrate their strategic orientations under unprecedented constraints. As the legal framework narrowed the scope of collective action, depoliticized labor relations, and criminalized class-based militancy, unions faced the dilemma of how to maintain relevance in a repressive and market-driven environment.

This section examines the shifting terrain of union strategies between 1980 and 2002, focusing on how labor organizations navigated authoritarian restrictions, privatization, and structural precarity. Drawing on Hyman's⁶⁸ strategic triangle of "class," "market," and "society," it explores how Turkish unions oscillated between adaptation, accommodation, and resistance—sometimes retreating into technocratic negotiation, sometimes asserting political confrontation, and at times seeking legitimacy through societal claims. These tensions not only reshaped the organizational identity of trade unions but also revealed the fractured and contested nature of labor's recomposition in the neoliberal era.

Following the 1980 military coup, Turkey's union landscape underwent a deep transformation, not only due to the economic restructuring of the neoliberal turn but also because of the direct political repression and legal redesign of the union field. While unions had developed significant organizational capacity during the era of import substitution, the 1980 coup dismantled much of this infrastructure, effectively subordinating the labor movement to the emerging neoliberal order. All strikes and collective bargaining processes were suspended, union activity was banned, and a total shutdown of political life ensued. The most dramatic blow came with the closure of the DİSK, which had been the most militant and left-leaning federation. DİSK remained banned for over a decade, and when it returned in the 1990s, its influence had shrunk significantly,

⁶⁸ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

particularly in key industrial sectors like metal, where it became largely confined to public service unions such as GENEL-İŞ⁶⁹.

In contrast, the TÜRK-İŞ and HAK-İŞ confederations were allowed to continue operating, albeit under heavy state tutelage. Even within Türk-İş, left-leaning unions such as YOL-İŞ, PETROL-İŞ, and DERİ-İŞ were temporarily suspended, while pro-employer affiliates remained active⁷⁰. The appointment of TÜRK-İŞ General Secretary Sadık Şide as Minister of Social Security during the junta further illustrated the blurred line between union leadership and military-backed governance. This strategic toleration of certain unions while silencing others laid the foundation for what would become a hegemonic model of yellow unionism. As Uğur Güç explained, the military regime's repression extended beyond institutional bans—it produced a generation of young workers who no longer regarded unionism as a legitimate form of political expression⁷¹.

The legal architecture created under the junta institutionalized this suppression. The 1982 Constitution limited union organizing to state-defined industrial branches and introduced a dual-majority system: unions had to secure at least 10% of membership in their industrial sector and represent at least 50% of the workers in a workplace to be recognized. This framework was cemented through two pivotal laws passed in 1983—Law No. 2821 on trade unions and Law No. 2822 on collective bargaining, strikes, and lockouts. These laws imposed financial scrutiny, restricted sectoral-level bargaining, and defined a broad range of actions as illegal strikes. They also authorized the Council of Ministers to suspend strikes for up to 60 days under vague criteria such as national security or public

⁶⁹ Gürcan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*; Bozkurt - Güngen, "Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities Under the AKP Governments in Turkey."

⁷⁰ Koç, *Türk Sendikal Hareketi ve Çağdaş Misyonerler*.

⁷¹ Gürcan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

health⁷². In this way, the coup's legacy endured, restricting labor militancy long after the military had formally exited the political scene.

The experience of BİRLEŞİK METAL-İŞ highlights the cumulative challenges posed by this system. Formed through the merger of Türkiye Maden-İŞ—banned after the coup—and Otomobil-İŞ, the union faced aggressive employer pressure. Firms, often backed by their associations like MESS, encouraged workers to join TÜRK METAL, a pro-employer alternative. This yellow unionism, as Savaş Alpaslan noted, became a structural instrument for both political and economic elites to prevent the resurgence of independent labor organizing⁷³. The fight against yellow unionism became as critical as resisting neoliberal restructuring or state repression.

Nonetheless, categorizing Türk-İş solely as a collaborator would obscure important shifts. According to Koç⁷⁴, Türk-İş's position evolved depending on the political context. With DİSK banned in the 1980s, Türk-İş emerged as the dominant force and, in moments of political opening—such as the waning influence of ANAP in the late 1980s—adopted a more militant stance. During the 1989 Spring Actions, Türk-İş affiliates led workplace protests and strikes, demonstrating that even within the constraints of the post-coup order, union agency remained possible. However, this window of militancy closed again in the 2000s under Mustafa Kumlu's leadership, as Türk-İş moved closer to the AKP government and retreated from oppositional politics⁷⁵. The trajectory of TÜRK-İŞ thus reveals how unions oscillated between resistance and collaboration depending on broader political alignments.

Privatization further decimated union power. As public enterprises were dismantled, unions like TEKGIDA-İŞ lost their core bases in state-

⁷² Bozkurt - Güngen, "Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities Under the AKP Governments in Turkey."

⁷³ Gürçan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

⁷⁴ Koç, *Türk Sendikal Hareketi ve Çağdaş Misyonerler*.

⁷⁵ Gürçan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

owned firms such as TEKEL and ÇAY-KUR. Membership in TÜRK-İŞ fell from nearly 900,000 in the early 1990s to around 250,000 by the end of the 2000s. Some union leaders failed to oppose privatization; others actively supported or attempted to manage it through worker buyouts⁷⁶. Even unions that resisted, such as PETROL-İŞ, faced shrinking employment pools and growing employer hostility. Privatization was not simply economic restructuring—it was a political tool aimed at dismantling traditions of labor militancy.

The tourism and media sectors illustrate how neoliberal deregulation fostered de-unionization beyond privatization. DEV TURİZM-İŞ lost most of its foothold in the hospitality industry, and labor conditions declined drastically. In the media, state-backed conglomerates dismantled union structures, replacing them with precarious labor contracts. According to Özsever, this was not only an economic strategy but a political one—ensuring that labor’s voice would not challenge neoliberal reforms⁷⁷.

Despite these constraints, workers mounted powerful resistance in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The 1986 Netaş strike and the 1988–89 SEKA actions paved the way for the 1989 Spring Actions, during which 600,000 workers defied union bureaucracies and organized from below. These protests combined traditional and creative tactics—slowdowns, sick leave, public demonstrations—and secured a 140% wage increase. Politically, they contributed to the downfall of Turgut Özal’s government⁷⁸. The 1990–91 Zonguldak Coal Miners’ Resistance followed, with nearly 50,000 miners marching 100 kilometers to Ankara. Although material gains were limited, the protest directly challenged the austerity regime and sparked a generation of labor activists⁷⁹.

The early 1990s also witnessed a major breakthrough in public sector unionism. Public servants, especially teachers, began organizing again

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ M.G. Doğan, “When Neoliberalism Confronts the Moral Economy of Workers: The Final Spring of Turkish Labor Unions,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 11 (2010): 1–20.

⁷⁹ Gürcan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

after years of repression. The establishment of EĞİTİM-İŞ in 1990 led to the creation of KESK in 1995. This period saw intense struggle for union rights—strikes, rallies, hunger strikes—and highlighted the return of class struggle in new terrains. Kurdish “patriotic laborers” also gained influence within KESK, injecting identity politics into union discourse (Koç, 2016; Gürcan & Mete, 2017).

Yet the 1994 economic crisis marked a turning point. Real wages declined, employment became increasingly precarious, and union density collapsed. The number of unionized workers dropped from over one million in 1993 to just 227,990 in 1994 (Koç, 2010, p. 346). Despite the flashes of resistance, the structural constraints imposed by neoliberalism and legal repression proved enduring. The labor movement entered the 2000s fragmented, demobilized, and institutionally marginalized—its capacity to shape political outcomes severely weakened.

To conclude, between 1980 and 2002, Turkish trade unions navigated an increasingly repressive and neoliberal environment by adopting divergent and often contradictory strategic orientations. The dominant trend in this period was a shift away from class-based strategies and toward market and societal orientations—albeit unevenly and with varying degrees of agency and constraint.

After the 1980 military coup, legal and institutional restructuring profoundly restricted unions’ ability to act as class organizations. The closure of DİSK and the suppression of left-leaning union currents eliminated the most prominent bearers of class-struggle unionism, leaving Türk-İş and Hak-İş as the principal actors in the field. These confederations, particularly Türk-İş, increasingly embraced a market-oriented strategy, characterized by social partnership, institutional integration, and adaptation to the state's neoliberal agenda. Rather than contesting the commodification of labor or resisting privatization, many union leaders aligned with the restructuring process or attempted to negotiate limited concessions, reflecting an internalization of market imperatives.

At the same time, unions sought to reposition themselves within the societal pole by building legitimacy through legal channels and moral claims to representation, especially in the realm of public sector

unionism. The emergence of KESK and the rise of public servant organizing in the 1990s embodied a shift toward social movement unionism, where unions framed their struggles not only in terms of wages and working conditions but also as broader fights for democratic rights and cultural recognition—particularly in the case of pro-Kurdish union segments. These efforts marked a partial reactivation of the society pole, though they often lacked the structural power to enforce demands.

Moments of class mobilization, such as the 1989 Spring Actions and the 1990–91 Zonguldak resistance, demonstrated the continued potential for unions to articulate a class-based strategy grounded in rank-and-file militancy and autonomous workplace organization. However, these episodes remained exceptional. They temporarily reactivated class capacities but did not translate into lasting structural power or strategic reorientation. By the late 1990s, economic crises, financialization, and deepening precarization had further fragmented labor and eroded the foundations for collective action.

In sum, the 1980–2002 period was marked by a structural displacement of unions away from the class pole of Hyman’s triangle. The authoritarian legal framework, combined with employer-backed collaborationist unionism and neoliberal economic restructuring, curtailed class-based unionism and pushed unions toward adaptation, institutional accommodation, or symbolic resistance. Despite episodic ruptures and grassroots mobilizations, Turkish unionism by 2002 stood weakened, fragmented, and increasingly disconnected from the working-class base it once claimed to represent.

§ 3.3 The AKP Era: Consolidation of Hegemony and Constriction of Labor

The neoliberal transformation of Turkey’s political economy, initiated under the military regime in the 1980s and evolving through the crisis-ridden 1990s, laid the groundwork for a more consolidated and assertive phase under the AKP government after 2002. While earlier periods of neoliberalization were marked by economic volatility, contested reforms,

and intermittent episodes of labor resistance, the AKP era introduced a more disciplined and centralized model of governance that blended authoritarian statecraft with market liberalism. In doing so, the AKP not only stabilized the conditions of capitalist accumulation but also restructured state–labor relations in a way that rendered traditional forms of unionism increasingly obsolete.

This chapter conceptualizes the AKP period through the lens of authoritarian neoliberalism, which describes a mode of rule wherein market-oriented reforms are insulated from democratic accountability and imposed through technocratic and coercive means. The AKP’s consolidation of power was accompanied by the institutionalization of technocratic governance, the erosion of labor protections, and the selective expansion of social policies aimed at securing consent without empowering collective labor agency. Drawing on this framework, the chapter traces how authoritarian neoliberalism reconfigured both the institutional landscape and the everyday conditions of labor, thereby suppressing class-based resistance while producing new modes of worker subordination and fragmentation.

Building on this analysis, the chapter further examines the concept of authoritarian flexibility, a term that captures the paradoxical combination of rigid control over collective labor rights and the deregulation of individual employment relations. Through legislative reforms, privatization, and institutional engineering, the AKP simultaneously undermined union power and expanded precarious, low-cost, and disposable forms of labor. The result has been a labor regime characterized by deepening inequality, declining union density, and the marginalization of independent labor organizations.

Finally, this chapter evaluates the transformation of union strategies under these conditions by situating them within Hyman’s strategic triangle of “class,” “market,” and “society.” It explores how unions—constrained by legal barriers and political repression—have navigated the shifting terrain of authoritarian neoliberalism. While some have adapted through institutional accommodation or market bargaining, others have attempted to revive class-based organizing in fragmented and precarious

settings. These divergent strategies illuminate the possibilities and limits of labor resistance under an increasingly repressive regime.

3.3.1 *Neoliberal Authoritarianism and Political-Economic Restructuring under the AKP Rule*

Authoritarian neoliberalism, as a theoretical framework, describes a specific mode of state-market interaction where market-oriented reforms are implemented and sustained through coercive, non-democratic, or depoliticizing means⁸⁰. In the Turkish context, this has entailed the systematic insulation of economic decision-making from popular participation, prioritizing financial orthodoxy and capital accumulation over social welfare and labor rights⁸¹. The period following the 2001 crisis exemplifies this, as a "Transition to the Strong Economy" program, spearheaded by Kemal Derviş, explicitly sought to "disentangle economics from politics" by enacting swift, technocratic legislative changes.

This approach, subsequently embraced and deepened by the AKP government, involved establishing seemingly independent institutions like the Central Bank and regulatory agencies, alongside aggressive privatization programs and the weakening of labor protections⁸². Far from being a mere technocratic adjustment, this process solidified a state structure that actively disciplined labor and marginalized democratic

⁸⁰ C.B. Tansel, ed., *States of Discipline: Authoritarian Neoliberalism and the Contested Reproduction of Capitalist Order* (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2017); I. Bruff, "The Rise of Authoritarian Neoliberalism," *Rethinking Marxism* 26, no. 1 (2013): 113–29.

⁸¹ Akçay, "Revisiting the Rise and Decline of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: A Political Economy Analysis of AKP's Initial Decade"; Bozkurt - Güngen, "Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities Under the AKP Governments in Turkey."

⁸² Akçay, "Revisiting the Rise and Decline of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: A Political Economy Analysis of AKP's Initial Decade"; Z. Öniş, "Power, Interests and Coalitions: The Political Economy of Mass Privatisation in Turkey," *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2011): 707–24; Özkiziltan, "Authoritarian Neoliberalism in AKP's Turkey: An Industrial Relations Perspective."

accountability in economic policy, ensuring conditions conducive to capital expansion even at the expense of social and political freedoms⁸³.

Following the 2001 crisis, maintaining low labor costs to ensure international competitiveness remained a key strategy, supporting an export-oriented accumulation regime. As a result, economic growth and productivity surged. However, this growth was driven largely by reductions in the labor force rather than by technological advancement or increased labor efficiency. Throughout the 2000s, the employment-to-population ratio remained below its 1990s level. Unemployment was high, and labor force participation remained low—leading many scholars to characterize the period as one of “jobless growth”⁸⁴.

Alongside these neoliberal commitments, the AKP sought to balance its agenda by pledging enhancements in social policy—such as increased health expenditures⁸⁵ and broader social security coverage⁸⁶—albeit within the constraints of fiscal discipline and growth targets. Strong economic performance under the conditions of regulatory neoliberalism and favorable global liquidity played a crucial role in securing the AKP’s continued electoral success. The party skillfully employed both formal and informal redistributive mechanisms to consolidate and expand its electoral base. This strategy unfolded in an international context conducive to what Öniş⁸⁷ describes as “social neoliberalism”—a model combining economic liberalization with selective and targeted social spending to reinforce political legitimacy.

The depoliticization of economic governance emerged as one of the defining theme of the authoritarian neoliberalism. However, efforts to restructure the state in accordance with this principle encountered the

⁸³ Akçay, “Revisiting the Rise and Decline of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: A Political Economy Analysis of AKP’s Initial Decade.”

⁸⁴ Şenses, “Turkey’s Experience with Neoliberal Policies Since 1980 in Retrospect and Prospect,” 21.

⁸⁵ Z. Öniş, “The Triumph of Conservative Globalism: The Political Economy of the AKP Era,” *Turkish Studies* 13, no. 2 (2012): 135–52.

⁸⁶ Akçay, “Neoliberal Populism in Turkey and Its Crisis.”

⁸⁷ Öniş, “The Triumph of Conservative Globalism: The Political Economy of the AKP Era.”

challenge of dismantling Turkey's traditional Kemalist state cadres, which had historically favored relatively more statist policies⁸⁸. The rise of the AKP marked a critical turning point in this process. As a counter-revolutionary and Islamist force opposed to the Kemalist regime, the AKP not only deepened economic liberalization by dismantling governance structures dominated by Kemalist and statist elites but also strategically leveraged Western discourses of democratization and civilianization, alongside pro-EU rhetoric, to undermine Kemalists and the military⁸⁹. Therefore, between 2002 and 2013, Turkish economic governance was shaped by the principle of depoliticization, which underpinned a far-reaching wave of neoliberal reforms, state restructuring, and the creation of technocratic institutions⁹⁰. The AKP introduced substantial structural changes, including the institutionalization of Central Bank independence, the establishment of autonomous regulatory bodies, and the creation of the Coordination Council for the Improvement of the Investment Environment (CCIIE). These reforms were complemented by the enactment of new labor legislation⁹¹, marking a critical juncture in the consolidation of an authoritarian neoliberal state.

The institutional and legal transformations of this period laid the groundwork for the internationalization of domestic capital and facilitated Turkey's integration into global circuits of financialization throughout the 2000s. In doing so, the AKP effectively revived and advanced the authoritarian neoliberal project initially launched by the military junta of the 1980s—one that had been temporarily stalled by the resurgence of labor militancy in the late 1980s.

The legislation granting independence to the Central Bank represented a pivotal moment in Turkey's neoliberal transformation,

⁸⁸ Akçay, "Revisiting the Rise and Decline of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: A Political Economy Analysis of AKP's Initial Decade."

⁸⁹ Akçay, "Neoliberal Populism in Turkey and Its Crisis."

⁹⁰ Akçay, "Revisiting the Rise and Decline of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: A Political Economy Analysis of AKP's Initial Decade."

⁹¹ In 2003, Labor Law No. 4857 and in 2012 Law No. 6356 on Trade Unions and Collective Bargaining Agreements were enacted. For a detailed account see next section.

significantly contributing to the reduction of inflation and shifting the banking sector's orientation toward household and industrial lending. By insulating monetary policy from direct political influence, this reform fostered macroeconomic stability and enhanced productivity and competitiveness without resorting to currency devaluation. Consequently, the Central Bank emerged as a key pillar of economic governance.

Another critical component in the consolidation of Turkey's authoritarian neoliberal state was the establishment of Independent Regulatory Agencies (IRAs). Tasked with overseeing strategic sectors such as banking, telecommunications, and energy, these institutions were ostensibly designed to eliminate political interference and ensure regulatory neutrality. However, by the 2010s, these agencies experienced increasing political encroachment, revealing the limits of depoliticization and exposing the contradictions within the authoritarian neoliberal model⁹².

The formation of the CCIIE further illustrates the institutionalization of technocratic governance. Bringing together senior state officials and representatives from key segments of capital—particularly influential business organizations such as the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey—the CCIIE aimed to improve competitiveness by reforming the business climate and enhancing productivity. It played a central role in drafting and negotiating legislative and regulatory changes that aligned with capital's interests⁹³.

Collectively, these institutional changes formed the foundation of a technocratic and depoliticized state structure, as Akçay⁹⁴ argues. The AKP's authoritarian neoliberalism became increasingly apparent through the marginalization of democratic participation in economic policymaking. In this configuration, economic governance was largely shielded from societal input, except for the influence exerted by dominant business actors.

⁹² Akçay, "Revisiting the Rise and Decline of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: A Political Economy Analysis of AKP's Initial Decade."

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

Another key dimension of authoritarian neoliberal state-building in Turkey has been the systematic weakening of the labor⁹⁵. The enactment of the 2003 Labor Law marked a turning point in this process (see also section 3.3.2), as it institutionalized flexible labor market arrangements, including part-time employment and subcontracting. These reforms re-structured labor relations to conform with the demands of a new phase of market liberalization, thereby entrenching the foundations of an authoritarian neoliberal state. The legislation significantly expanded the discretionary power of employers over labor processes, eroding the collective organizational capacity of workers through the enforcement of market discipline. Serving as both a legal and material instrument of neoliberal restructuring, the new labor law enabled greater flexibility in employment contracts and streamlined procedures for hiring and dismissal. It was explicitly designed to diminish the bargaining power of labor and facilitate employer dominance in the workplace. These developments were accompanied by the Central Bank's inflation-targeting regime, which provided the monetary framework for maintaining low-wage policies, further consolidating capital's control over labor under the guise of technocratic governance.

Beyond the modifications to labor law, accelerated privatization served as another key mechanism for controlling the working class⁹⁶. Between 1986 and 1999, privatization revenues totaled only \$4.6 billion. However, by 2013, Turkey generated \$10.6 billion from privatizations, with total revenues between 2005 and 2013 reaching \$46.8 billion⁹⁷. The privatization of State Economic Enterprises (SEEs) had a twofold detrimental effect on the labor movement. First, it directly weakened unions and dismantled the most organized sectors of the working class, leaving them permanently enfeebled. Second, it led to a rise in the cost of goods

⁹⁵ Özkiziltan, "Authoritarian Neoliberalism in AKP's Turkey: An Industrial Relations Perspective"; Bozkurt - Güngen, "Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities Under the AKP Governments in Turkey."

⁹⁶ Öniş, "Power, Interests and Coalitions: The Political Economy of Mass Privatisation in Turkey."

⁹⁷ A. Savaş et al., *Emek Yılı 2014*, ed. Y. Koç (Istanbul: Yazılama, 2014), 382.

and services that had previously been provided at lower prices by SEEs, as they were now subject to market pricing. This shift placed additional financial strain on workers' budgets. The combined effects of labor law changes, privatization, deteriorating working conditions, and high unemployment significantly undermined the organizational strength of the working class. Trade union density in Turkey fell sharply from 29.1% in 2001 to 6.3% in 2015⁹⁸. Faced with limited real wage growth, workers increasingly turned to borrowing to sustain their consumption levels. Consequently, household debt surged from 1.8% of GDP in 2002 to 19.5% in 2013, heightening both financial and political pressures and making collective resistance more difficult.

The twin pillars of authoritarian neoliberalism—state restructuring and labor suppression—were sustained by a domestic demand-driven growth model supported by capital inflows between 2002 and 2013. This model relied on fiscal discipline, high real interest rates facilitated through IMF programs, and an appreciated Turkish Lira (TL) to control inflation. As global financial conditions improved, real interest rates declined, enabling continued capital inflows that helped maintain price stability. However, this growth model exhibited structural weaknesses including rising unemployment, the contraction of manufacturing and agriculture, high current account deficits, and increasing dependence on external capital. To mitigate social discontent, the government implemented a limited welfare system for marginalized groups and promoted financial inclusion through financialization⁹⁹.

The year 2013 marked a decisive shift in Turkey's political economy. With the Federal Reserve's announcement of monetary tightening, the growth strategy of Turkey reliant on capital inflows and foreign debt

⁹⁸ Akçay, "Revisiting the Rise and Decline of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: A Political Economy Analysis of AKP's Initial Decade"; Akçay, "Neoliberal Populism in Turkey and Its Crisis."

⁹⁹ U. Akçay et al., "Financialisation and Macroeconomic Regimes in Emerging Capitalist Countries Before and After the Great Recession," *International Journal of Political Economy* 51, no. 2 (2022): 77–100; Ö. Orhangazi and A.E. Yeldan, "The Re-Making of the Turkish Crisis," *Development and Change* 52 (2021): 460–503.

began to falter. Akçay¹⁰⁰ argues that this development undermined the material foundations of Turkey's dependent financialization, which had previously relied on a steady influx of external capital.

The year 2013 was also significant for being the scene of the Gezi Protests, which were the most crucial challenge that the AKP rule has ever faced, with thousands of ordinary people encamped in the Gezi Park to prevent the construction within the park at first, gradually evolving into anti-government protests. Although the encampment and resistance were suppressed with disproportionate use of the power of law enforcement¹⁰¹, the protests achieved at least that Gezi Park remains a park. The Gezi protests marked a turning point in terms of the character of authoritarianism of AKP that began to focus its efforts on becoming dominant rather than hegemonic. That is, a turn towards a full-blown 'authoritarian populism', which entails not the suspension of all democratic channels, as in authoritarianism, but, rather, retaining some for mobilizing popular support for its increasing authoritarianism¹⁰².

In scholarly debates on the AKP's 23-year rule, a key contention is whether its authoritarianism represents a break from earlier governance or reflects a consistent trajectory. Some scholars¹⁰³ argue that the post-2013 period, marked by intensified repression following the Gezi Park protests and the AKP's third electoral victory, signaled a shift. During the

¹⁰⁰ Akçay, "Revisiting the Rise and Decline of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: A Political Economy Analysis of AKP's Initial Decade."

¹⁰¹ A. Bilgiç, "Reclaiming the National Will: Resilience of Turkish Authoritarian Neoliberalism after Gezi," *South European Society and Politics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 259-280.

¹⁰² H. Özen, "Reproducing 'Hegemony' Thereafter? The Long-Term Political Effects of the Gezi Protests in Turkey," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 20, no. 2 (2020): 245-64.

¹⁰³ N. Balkan et al., *Introduction in The Neoliberal Landscape and the Rise of Islamist Capital in Turkey*, ed. Eds) N. Balkan et al. (Berghahn Books: New York, Oxford, 2015); B. Duran, "The Justice and Development Party's 'New Politics': Steering toward Conservative Democracy, a Revised Islamic Agenda or Management of New Crises?," in *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*, ed. Ü (Cizre, Routledge, Abingdon, 2008), 80-106; E. Özbudun, "From Political Islam to Conservative Democracy: The Case of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey," *South European Society and Politics* 11, nos. 3-4 (2006): 543-57.

2000s and early 2010s, the AKP was often seen as harmonizing Islam, democracy, and market liberalism¹⁰⁴, balancing democratization with technocratic economic management. This phase was characterized by weakening military-bureaucratic tutelage, insulating economic policy from political interference, and gaining support from institutions like the IMF, World Bank, and EU—developments viewed as reinforcing democratic norms¹⁰⁵. Özbudun¹⁰⁶ and Duran¹⁰⁷ describe this period as one of “conservative democracy,” followed by an authoritarian turn.

Conversely, others claim authoritarian elements were embedded from the outset¹⁰⁸, interpreting the regime as a continuity shaped by evolving techniques of control. Scholars like Akçay, Tansel, and Bozkurt-Güngen¹⁰⁹ emphasize continuity, particularly through persistent anti-labor and anti-union policies and the long-standing repression of labor opposition. Akçay¹¹⁰ characterizes the AKP’s rule as a continuum from technocratic authoritarianism to nationalist-conservative populism—an adaptation to the crises of authoritarian neoliberalism. Bozkurt-

¹⁰⁴ Balkan et al., *Introduction in The Neoliberal Landscape and the Rise of Islamist Capital in Turkey*.

¹⁰⁵ Bozkurt - Güngen, “Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities Under the AKP Governments in Turkey.”

¹⁰⁶ Özbudun, “From Political Islam to Conservative Democracy: The Case of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey.”

¹⁰⁷ Duran, “The Justice and Development Party’s ‘New Politics’: Steering toward Conservative Democracy, a Revised Islamic Agenda or Management of New Crises?’.”

¹⁰⁸ C.B. Tansel, “Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Democratic Backsliding in Turkey: Beyond the Narratives of Progress,” *South European Society and Politics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 197–217.

¹⁰⁹ Akçay, “Revisiting the Rise and Decline of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: A Political Economy Analysis of AKP’s Initial Decade”; Tansel, “Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Democratic Backsliding in Turkey: Beyond the Narratives of Progress”; Bozkurt - Güngen, “Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities Under the AKP Governments in Turkey.”

¹¹⁰ Akçay, “Revisiting the Rise and Decline of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: A Political Economy Analysis of AKP’s Initial Decade.”

Güngen¹¹¹ similarly argues that rule-based, technocratic governance in the 2000s gradually gave way to coercive and discretionary methods by the 2010s, with power increasingly concentrated in the executive. The AKP, especially after the 2007–08 global financial crisis, abandoned its technocratic stance in favor of political monopolization, suppressing both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition.

As a describing phenomenon of executive-centred authoritarian ne-liberal rule of AKP, Arslanalp and Erkmen¹¹² assessed the emergency rule declared in 2016, arguing that Turkey's path to emergency rule was shaped by earlier political transformations, particularly through authoritarian control over the judiciary, media, and political opposition. Judicial control began with the Ergenekon (2008) and Sledgehammer (2010) trials, where Special Authority Courts used fabricated evidence and ignored due process¹¹³. This deepened after the 2010 Constitutional Referendum and culminated in the judiciary's subordination following the 2013 Erdoğan–Gülen split¹¹⁴. Media control combined repression of dissenting journalists with the creation of a pro-government bloc through state resources¹¹⁵. The opposition faced legal and extralegal repression, including libel charges, protest bans, mass detentions, and lifted immunities¹¹⁶.

¹¹¹ Bozkurt - Güngen, "Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities Under the AKP Governments in Turkey."

¹¹² M. Arslanalp and T.D. Erkmen, "Repression without Exception: A Study of Protest Bans during Turkey's State of Emergency (2016-2018)," *South European Society and Politics* 25, no. 1 (2020): 99–125.

¹¹³ Ö. Kaygusuz, "Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Regime Security in Turkey: Moving to an 'Exceptional State' under AKP," *South European Society and Politics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 281–302.

¹¹⁴ E. Özbudun, "Turkey's Judiciary and the Drift toward Competitive Authoritarianism," *The International Spectator* 50, no. 2 (2015): 42–55.

¹¹⁵ B. Esen and S. Gümüşçü, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 9 (2016): 1581–606.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Post-2013 authoritarianism intensified through two turning points: the Erdoğan–Gülen conflict leading to the 2016 coup attempt¹¹⁷, and the 2015 collapse of the Kurdish peace process after the AKP lost its majority and the HDP's rise¹¹⁸. Military operations in Kurdish towns caused widespread rights violations¹¹⁹, while rising securitization and ISIS-linked attacks enabled the AKP's electoral recovery and alliance with the MHP, further shrinking political freedoms¹²⁰.

By 2016, when the state of emergency was officially declared, key mechanisms of democratic accountability had already been dismantled. This unchecked emergency rule was evident in the extensive use of emergency decrees, which amended laws, dismissed around 130,000 public employees, shut down numerous media outlets and associations, and removed pro-Kurdish elected mayors. Over 150,000 people were detained, including HDP leaders, journalists, and academics¹²¹. Though these actions were justified as a crackdown on Gülenists and the PKK, they also targeted broader dissent, including those opposing authoritarianism or questioning the government's military approach to the Kurdish issue.

Beyond repression, the emergency period led to institutional restructuring. The 36 emergency decrees covered issues far beyond what the Constitution allows under emergency rule, yet the Constitutional Court refused to review them, enabling unchecked executive authority¹²². The ultimate consolidation of power came with constitutional amendments that replaced the parliamentary system with an executive presidency, a

¹¹⁷ Kaygusuz, "Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Regime Security in Turkey: Moving to an 'Exceptional State' under AKP"; B. Esen and Ş. Gümüşçü, "Turkey: How the Coup Failed," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 1 (2017): 59–73.

¹¹⁸ C. Çiçek, *Süreç: Kürt Çatışması ve Çözüm Arayışları* (İletişim Yayınları: İstanbul, 2018).

¹¹⁹ Arslanalp and Erkmen, "Repression without Exception: A Study of Protest Bans during Turkey's State of Emergency (2016-2018)."

¹²⁰ Kaygusuz, "Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Regime Security in Turkey: Moving to an 'Exceptional State' under AKP."

¹²¹ Arslanalp and Erkmen, "Repression without Exception: A Study of Protest Bans during Turkey's State of Emergency (2016-2018)."

¹²² K. Altıparmak et al., "Atipik KHK'ler ve Daimi Hukuksuzluk: Artık Yasaları İdare mi İptal Edecek?," *Olağanüstü Hal ve Uygulamaları Bilgi Notu*, no. 1 (2018).

shift ratified in the 2017 referendum, which Erdoğan won by a narrow margin, and cemented in the 2018 presidential election¹²³. Such an environment of political pressure, as shown in the analysis of Arslanalp and Erkmen¹²⁴ regarding the 694 protests banned in total (though 34 of them related to labor), has greatly restricted the ability of workers to organize and seek their rights, and has discouraged the working class.

In sum, the consolidation of authoritarian neoliberalism in Turkey under the AKP entailed a dual process of state restructuring and labor suppression, institutionalized through technocratic depoliticization and reinforced by coercive governance. The AKP deepened neoliberal reforms initiated in the post-1980 era by insulating economic policy from democratic oversight, dismantling labor protections, and subordinating the judiciary and media to executive control. While the early 2000s were marked by technocratic legitimacy and electoral consolidation, the post-2013 era witnessed a shift toward overt authoritarianism, characterized by executive aggrandizement, the erosion of civil liberties, and the criminalization of dissent. The transformation of Turkey's political economy thus reflects a trajectory in which economic liberalization and political repression became increasingly intertwined, subordinating labor and democratic accountability to the imperatives of capital accumulation and regime stability.

It is necessary to uncover and underline what this political oppression environment means for labor movements and workers. With the institutionalization of the precarious labor regime (see next section), working people are individually oppressed and condemned to a lack of political alternatives at the party level, and if they organize, they face the

¹²³ B. Esen and Ş. Gümüşçü, "A Small Yes for Presidentialism: The Turkish Constitutional Referendum of April 2017," *South European Society and Politics* 22, no. 3 (2017): 303–26; Y. Sözen, "Competition in a Populist Authoritarian Regime: The June 2019 Dual Elections in Turkey," *South European Society and Politics* 24, no. 3 (2019): 287–315.

¹²⁴ Arslanalp and Erkmen, "Repression without Exception: A Study of Protest Bans during Turkey's State of Emergency (2016-2018)."

threat of police violence, detention, and torture. Bozkurt-Güngen¹²⁵ argues that the labor policy agenda implemented during the AKP era has been an important, though not the sole, aspect of this authoritarian governance. This policy agenda has primarily been marked by the collective and institutional exclusion of working classes from the policy-making processes, along with their "disciplining through direct individual integration" into the political project of the AKP as consumers, users of credit, and recipients of social assistance.

To conclude, the AKP's economic governance between 2002 and 2013 exemplified a consolidated form of authoritarian neoliberalism, in which technocratic institutions, market-oriented reforms, and political repression were interwoven to secure capital accumulation. By depoliticizing economic decision-making through regulatory agencies and an independent central bank, the AKP entrenched a framework that systematically excluded labor from the policy process. Yet, this depoliticization remained selective and revocable, as seen in the increasing encroachment on supposedly autonomous institutions after 2013. Simultaneously, aggressive privatization, labor market flexibilization, and the dismantling of public sector employment eroded the structural power of the working class. Far from constituting a neutral process of modernization, these institutional transformations reconfigured class relations by weakening collective labor capacity and embedding individualized precarity. The groundwork was laid for a labor regime that subordinated workers to market volatility, indebtedness, and coercive state control—setting the stage for the consolidation of authoritarian flexibility that would characterize labor relations in the subsequent period.

¹²⁵ Bozkurt - Güngen, "Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities Under the AKP Governments in Turkey."

3.3.2 *Authoritarian Flexibility and Union Response Under AKP Rule*

This section examines the transformation of labor relations under the AKP through the lens of “authoritarian flexibility,”¹²⁶ a concept that captures the paradoxical combination of rigid control over collective labor rights and expansive deregulation of individual employment relations. The AKP’s labor regime facilitated capital accumulation by institutionalizing precarious, low-cost, and disposable labor while systematically undermining the collective power of workers. The chapter first analyzes the legal and institutional reforms that intensified labor market flexibilization—especially subcontracting, agency work, and informal employment—and then turns to the erosion of collective labor rights, including restrictions on unionization, collective bargaining, and striking. Through an empirical examination of labor force indicators and wage trends, the section demonstrates how authoritarian flexibility reshaped the Turkish labor market in favor of capital, resulting in deepening precarity, declining union density, and growing income inequality.

3.3.2.1 Individual Work Relations

To institutionalize labor market flexibility in line with capital’s demands, the AKP government introduced a series of neoliberal labor reforms that eroded job security, expanded subcontracting practices, and facilitated the proliferation of precarious employment. The enactment of Labor Act No. 4857 in 2003 marked a decisive departure from the pro-labor regulatory framework that had characterized the import substitution era. This legislation established the legal foundation for various flexible and atypical employment arrangements, including subcontracting and on-call work. It also significantly reduced the costs associated with redundancy by raising the minimum firm size required for job security provisions

¹²⁶ Çelik, “Turkey’s New Labour Regime Under the Justice and Development Party in the First Decade of the Twenty-First Century: Authoritarian Flexibilization.”

from 10 to 30 employees, thereby stripping more than half of the workforce of formal job protections¹²⁷.

The liberalization of labor relations continued with the implementation of the Private Employment Agencies Regulation in 2009, which ended the state's monopoly over employment mediation. This reform enabled private employment agencies to "rent" workers to third-party employers for up to 18 months, formalizing a system of agency work in which the agency retains the role of the legal employer. As a result of these reforms, subcontracted labor rapidly expanded across both private and public sectors. According to Ministry of Labor data, the number of subcontracted workers increased from 358,000 in 2002 to 1.5 million by 2011 under AKP rule¹²⁸.

In the public sector, the AKP strategically used the conversion of subcontracted workers into permanent employees as an electoral tool. These conversions were typically implemented around election periods, resulting in fluctuating numbers of subcontracted workers¹²⁹. As of 2022, the number of subcontracted workers in the public sector stood at 590,294. According to KESK¹³⁰ reports, while the rate of subcontracted employment continues to rise, the growth in the number of permanent public employees remains minimal, reflecting a broader trend of labor flexibilization and the erosion of stable employment in the public domain.

The Omnibus Act of 2011 significantly expanded the scope of flexible labor regulations in Turkey, incorporating forms such as homeworking and teleworking, often characterized by inadequate job security. The legislation also mandated internship requirements for companies, extended the probationary period from two to four months, and provided state-

¹²⁷ Ibid.; Gürcan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

¹²⁸ Çelik, "Turkey's New Labour Regime Under the Justice and Development Party in the First Decade of the Twenty-First Century: Authoritarian Flexibilization."

¹²⁹ K.E.S.K.- Kamu Emekçileri Sendikaları Konfederasyonu, *KESK 11* (Olağan Genel Kurulu Çalışma Raporu, 2024).

¹³⁰ Ibid.

subsidized incentives for employers to hire precarious workers under certain conditions¹³¹.

Despite the deteriorating conditions of labor, Turkish employers, the government, and international institutions such as the OECD have consistently portrayed Turkey's labor market as excessively rigid—a narrative that serves to legitimize ongoing neoliberal reforms. By framing rigid labor protections as barriers to growth and competitiveness, the OECD's Employment Protection Legislation indices obscure more nuanced indicators of labor precarity, such as informal employment, union density, and collective bargaining coverage. Even within the narrow scope of EPL indicators, the assertion of rigidity is questionable; Turkey ranks 18th out of 43 countries in terms of protections against dismissal, undermining the claim of excessive labor market regulation. Nonetheless, this framing reinforced market-centric labor models while marginalizing alternative, rights-based, or solidaristic approaches to labor regulation. This narrative formed the basis of the National Employment Strategy (NES) and the 2012 Programme of Government, both of which promoted labor market flexibilization as essential to adapting to global capitalist dynamics, addressing structural unemployment, and enhancing the competitiveness of the Turkish economy, through measures such as telecommuting and work-sharing schemes¹³².

Another pivotal development was the enactment of legislation in 2016 concerning temporary agency work, widely criticized by labor organizations and referred to as the "Slavery Act." This law permits employers to rent workers for up to eight months, with the possibility of two contract renewals, without providing basic labor protections such as severance pay, annual leave, union membership, social security, or retirement benefits. As of November 2024, an estimated 34.5% of workers in Turkey were employed without social security coverage, highlighting the deepening precarity within the labor market¹³³.

¹³¹ Evrensel, "Torba yasa: Esnek, güvencesiz ve kuralsız çalışma," 2011.

¹³² Çelik, "Turkey's New Labour Regime Under the Justice and Development Party in the First Decade of the Twenty-First Century: Authoritarian Flexibilization."

¹³³ D.I.S.K.-A.R., "İşsizlik ve İstihdamın Görünümü," 2024.

Consequently, the erosion of job security, expansion of subcontracting, and legalization of agency work reflect the logic of authoritarian flexibility—the regime that curtailed collective rights while promoting individualized precarity, aligning labor relations with capital’s needs through coercive state intervention.

Examining the basic indicators of labor relations created by authoritarian flexibility will also be important for understanding the labor regime. As can be seen in Figure 3.1, labor force participation and employment have been on a slow decline since 1980, while unemployment has been on a slow rise. This relative rise in unemployment and the slow decline in employment created a backdrop that allowed for labor cost reduction by increasing employment turnover in the post-2001 period. Besides that, the high rates of informal work, despite its decline, are key to demonstrate the level of precarity. Taken together with privatization, flexibilization and subcontracting, this labor market structure allows employers to reduce labor costs and increase productivity.

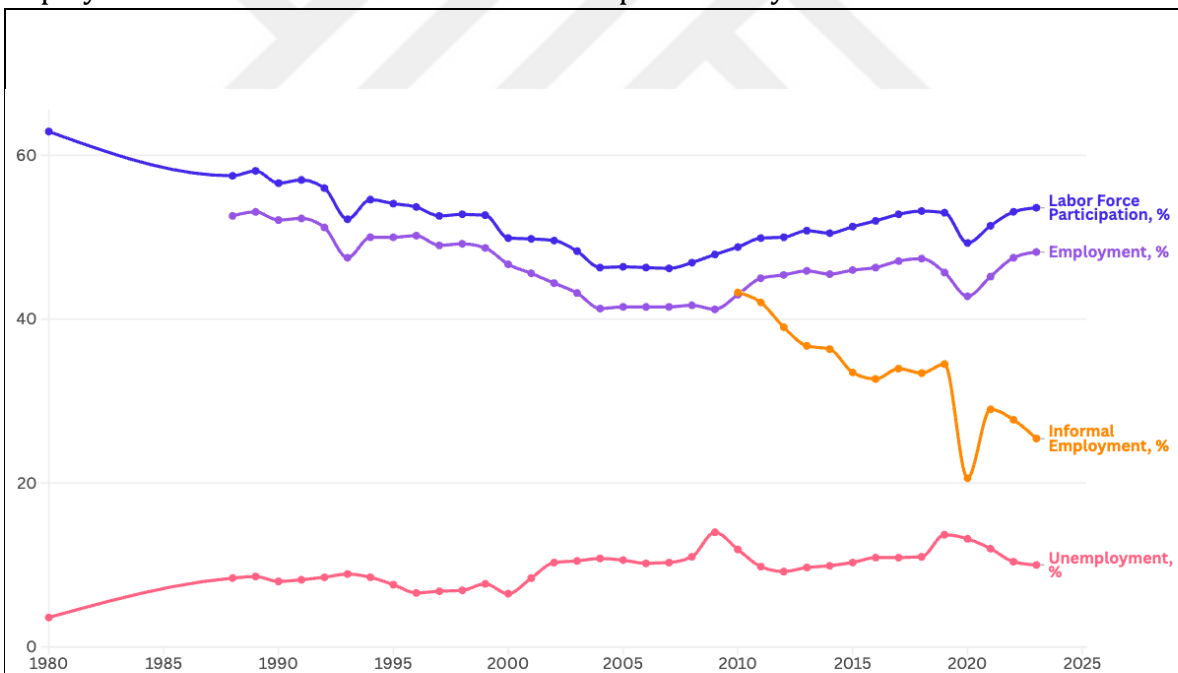
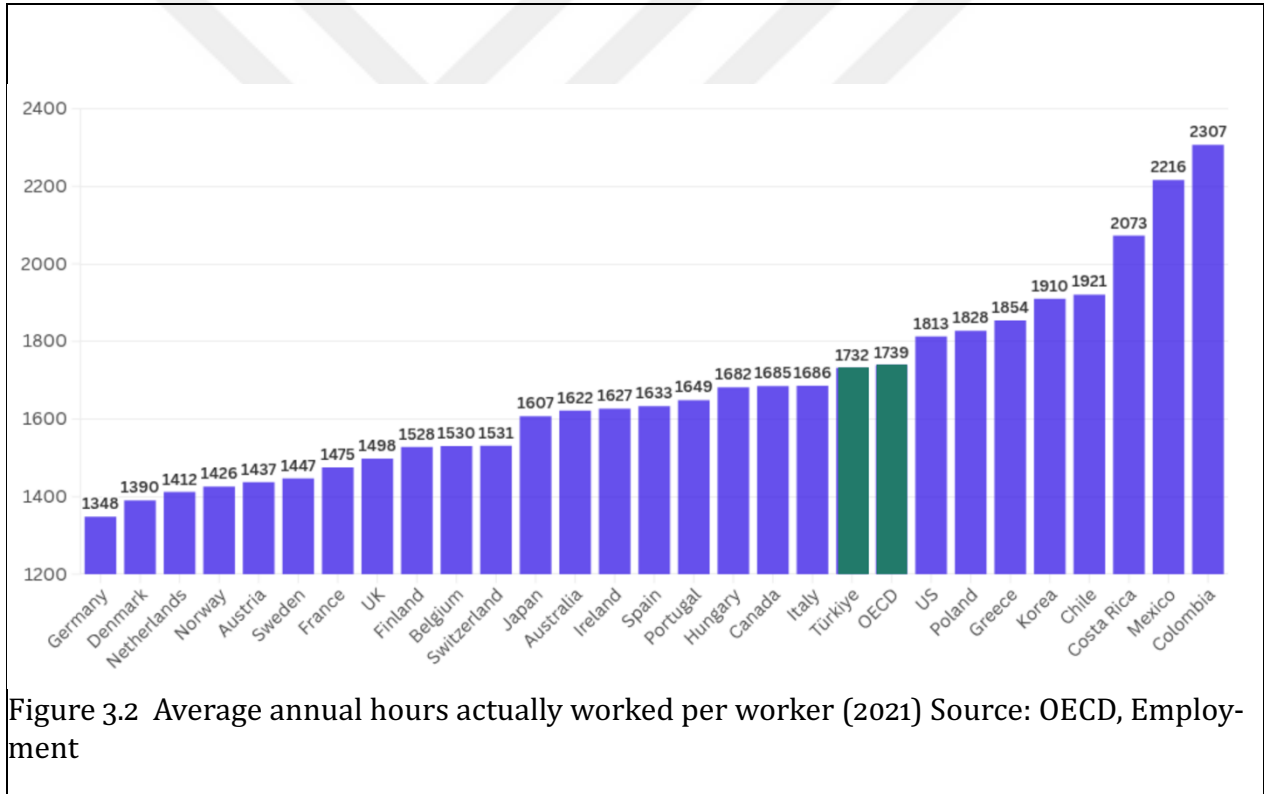


Figure 3.1 Labor force participation, employment and unemployment rates (1980-2023) Source: TurkStat, Work Life Indicators and compiled from the Social Security Institution’s Annual Activity Reports

Another indicator of the labor regime's emphasis on cost reduction and intensified labor extraction is the disparity between average annual working hours and average annual wages (Figures 3.2 and 3.3). As illustrated in Figure 3.2, the average Turkish worker logs approximately 1,732 hours per year, a figure closely aligned with the OECD average, indicating relatively long working hours. However, as shown in Figure 3, average annual wages in Turkey remain substantially below the OECD norm. While the OECD average stands at approximately 58,300 USD, the corresponding figure for Turkey is only 40,200 USD. This contrast suggests a labor regime characterized by high work intensity and low remuneration, wherein workers are subjected to extended working hours without commensurate economic compensation.



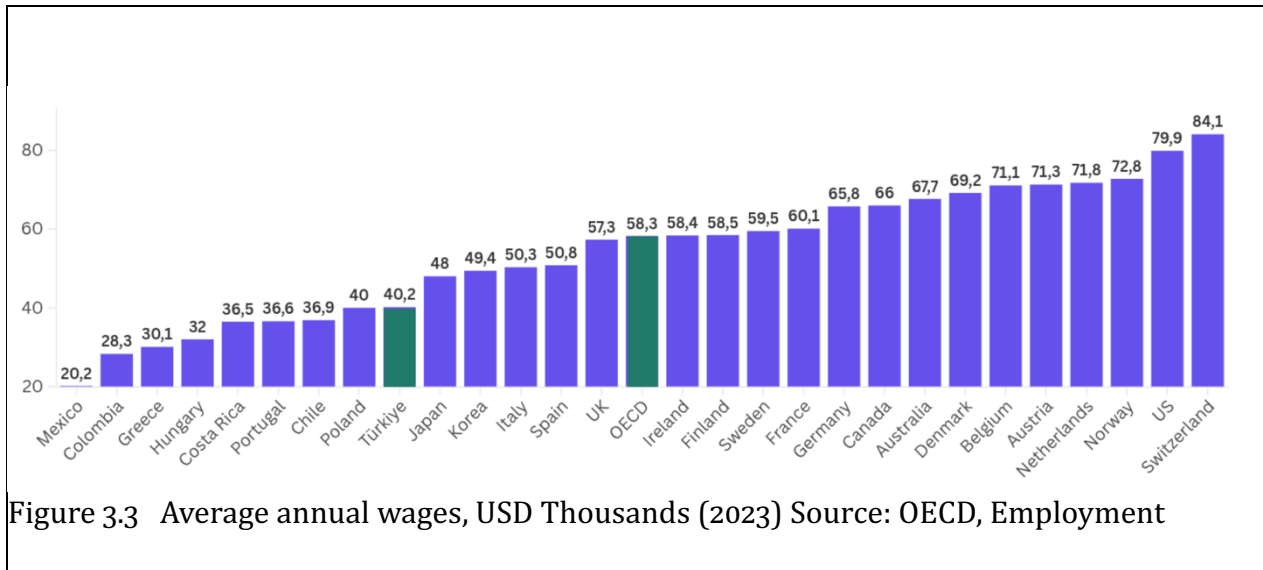


Figure 3.3 Average annual wages, USD Thousands (2023) Source: OECD, Employment

However, average wage figures may present a distorted picture of overall income conditions due to significant wage inequality in Turkey. Since higher-income groups disproportionately influence the mean, the earnings of lower-income segments may appear more favorable than they are in reality. To capture this disparity, Figure 3.4 presents the P80/20 and P90/10 ratios, which measure the income distribution between the top and bottom percentiles of households based on disposable income. The P80/20 ratio reflects the income share of the top 20% relative to the bottom 20%, while the P90/10 ratio compares the top 10% to the bottom 10%. Rising values in these indicators signal a worsening in income inequality. Although the P80/20 ratio declined modestly from 8.08 in 2006 to 6.89 in 2014, this did not indicate a substantial improvement in distributional equity. On the contrary, both the P80/20 and P90/10 ratios have increased since 2014, underscoring a long-term trend of deepening inequality in Turkey's income structure.

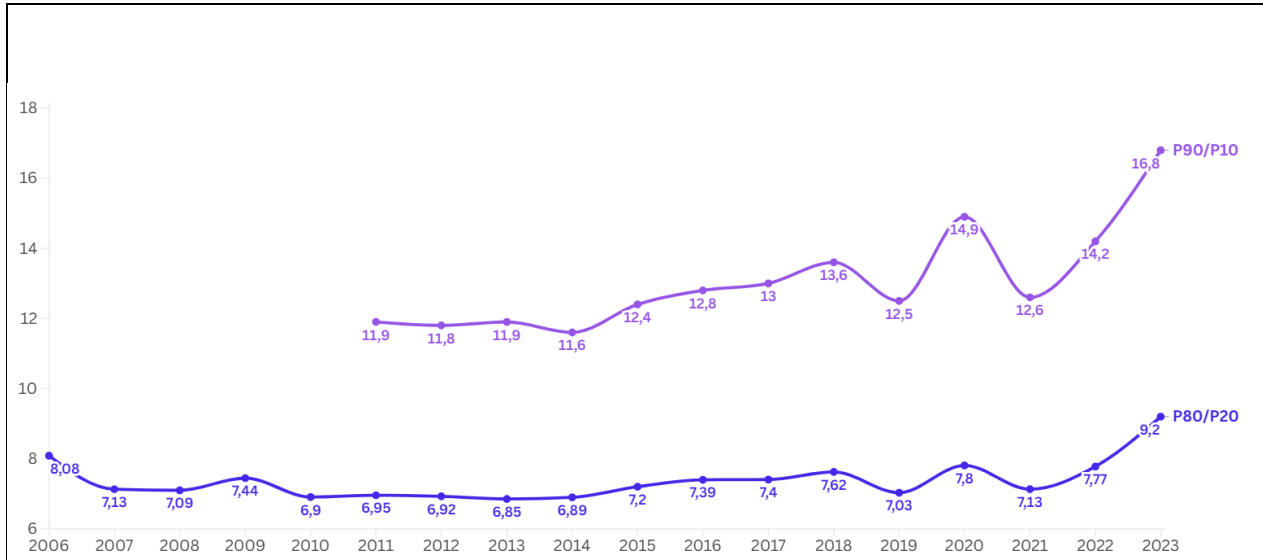


Figure 3.4 P80/P20 and P90/P10 Ratio by Household Disposable Income (2006-2023)
Source: TurkStat, Income and Living Conditions Survey

Finally, when interpreted alongside Figure 3.4, Figure 3.5 illustrates the widening gap between average annual wages and minimum wage levels, underscoring the effects of deepening income inequality. Such disparities are expected in contexts where top earners command disproportionately higher incomes than those at the bottom, as reflected in the P80/20 and P90/10 ratios. Notably, Figure 3.5 shows that while the annual minimum wage increased by 386%—from 1,500 USD in 2002 to 7,300 USD in 2025—the rise in average wages was limited to just 78% over the same period. This inverse dynamic suggests a compression of wage distribution from below, whereby minimum wages have risen faster than average wages, effectively drawing the overall wage structure downward. As of 2023, this trend has resulted in a labor market where the minimum wage is approaching the average wage. Data indicate that 8.5 million workers—constituting 48.9% of private sector employees—earned wages at or below the minimum wage level. Among them, 7.6 million (43.6%) earned the minimum wage or less, while 8.3 million (47.8%) earned only up to 5% above it. These figures highlight the erosion of wage differentiation and the entrenchment of low-wage employment in Turkey's labor market.

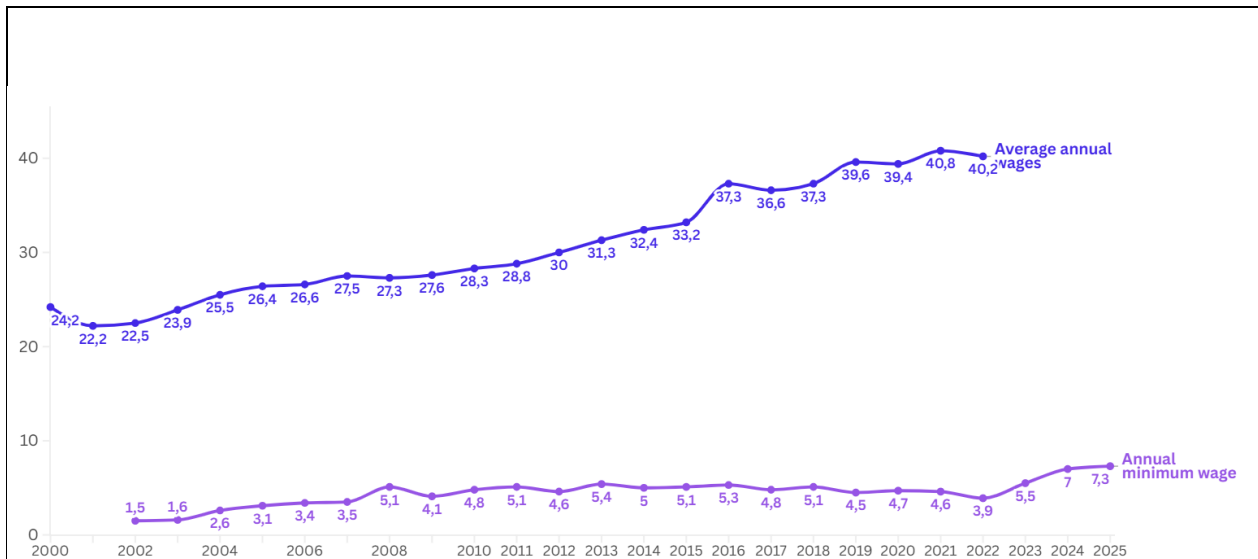


Figure 3.5 Average annual wages and annual minimum wages 2000-2025 (USD, Thousand)

Source: OECD, Employment; Ministry of Labor and Social Security, Minimum Wage

In summary, state intervention in individual labor relations under the AKP has centered on two key strategies: increasing precarity in formal employment, allowing expansion of informal work, and reducing labor costs for employers, primarily through hiring subsidies and reducing wages. As a result, formal employment has increasingly come to resemble informal employment, exposing the working class to heightened precarity¹³⁴.

3.3.2.2 Collective Work Relations

While individual labor relations have become increasingly flexible and insecure, collective rights have simultaneously declined, and the struggle for labor rights has been systematically obstructed. Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP has significantly weakened trade union rights, with both qualitative (through legislative changes, enforcement

¹³⁴ Bozkurt - Güngen, "Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities Under the AKP Governments in Turkey."

mechanisms, and socio-political pressures) and quantitative (in terms of union density and collective bargaining coverage) consequences.

The AKP government inherited and deepened the authoritarian labor regime established after the 1980 coup, maintaining the restrictive legal framework that curtails union organizing and collective action¹³⁵. Although collective bargaining regulations revised in 2012 with Unions and Collective Agreement Act, these reforms preserved strike bans, imposed high thresholds for union recognition, and weakened protections against anti-union dismissals, rather than democratizing labor relations. The new law imposed a dual-threshold requirement based on sectoral classification and workplace-level representation, with final authorization determined by the Ministry of Labor. This system frequently delays collective bargaining due to employer objections or inter-union disputes. Competency lawsuits can extend for years, leaving unions in a state of legal suspension and effectively disabling their organizational capacity. During this prolonged limbo, employers often pursue de-unionization strategies, such as the dismissal of unionized workers or coercion to induce resignations.

The restructuring of union sectors further complicated bargaining authorization, despite a nominal lowering of the threshold. Employers face minimal consequences for union-related dismissals, and workers in small workplaces were stripped of legal recourse. With strikes severely restricted and union density declining, the AKP era has resembled the repressive labor climate of the post-coup period, enabling the rise of collaborationist unions and suppressing labor militancy¹³⁶.

¹³⁵ Çelik, "Turkey's New Labour Regime Under the Justice and Development Party in the First Decade of the Twenty-First Century: Authoritarian Flexibilization"; Bozkurt - Güngen, "Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities Under the AKP Governments in Turkey"; Alpan Birelma, "Turkey's Rising Tide of Dissent: Charting the Wave of Non-Legal Strikes in the Mid-2010s," *Critical Sociology*, SAGE Publications Ltd, February 7, 2025, 08969205241310854.

¹³⁶ Gürcan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*; Çelik, "Turkey's New Labour Regime Under the Justice and Development Party in the First Decade of the Twenty-First Century: Authoritarian Flexibilization."

PTT-SEN, which carries out the organizing process in the communication sector, has published a report on the impossibility of collective bargaining concerning union law and related regulations¹³⁷. According to this report, even though the union carries out necessary legal procedures fully and completely, collective bargaining is de facto impossible due to extensive appeal mechanisms allocated to employers and their unjust misuse of them. The report demonstrates every step taken by the union to gain collective bargaining authority and by the employer lawyer to prevent the union from gaining authority. Consequently, the report showed that legal procedures predicted by union law make it unfeasible to contract collectively.

These institutional barriers to union activity have coincided with the rise of conservative unionism. Favoritism within the Ministry during authorization procedures, coupled with workplace-level pressure—particularly in public enterprises—has compelled many workers to join pro-government unions. As a result, conservative confederations such as Hak-İş and Memur-Sen have experienced unprecedented membership growth under the AKP rule. Meanwhile, Türk-İş-affiliated unions have displayed a more ambivalent stance, oscillating between alignment with government priorities and expressions of working-class representation depending on sectoral and local dynamics.

Union laws also promote a wide range of strike bans and postponements and don't allow workers to bargain for their rights as they would like to. Under these conditions, the structural capacity of the working class is increasingly constrained, making it more challenging for unions to reach potential members within a highly flexibilized labor market.

As a consequence of making collective bargaining processes ineffective, a decisive decline in unionization figures became visible throughout the decades. However, the official unionization figures appear relatively high since they are not based on calculation methods of international ILO standards. According to government statistics from 1984 to 2006,

¹³⁷ PTT-SEN, *PTT A.Ş ve Alt İşverenler Bünyesinde Görülen İşlerde Toplu İş Sözleşmesi Akdetme Önündeki Engellere İlişkin Taslak Rapor*.

unionization rates in Turkey reportedly ranged between 51% and 69%. However, these figures are not internationally recognized due to methodological flaws—most notably the inclusion of non-working members, inadequate institutional infrastructure, and the requirement of notary procedures for membership and resignation¹³⁸.

The 2012 union law introduced improvements such as electronic registration and updated membership definitions, allowing for more accurate data collection. Nonetheless, current Ministry of Labor statistics still fall short of ILO standards, as they exclude unregistered (informal) workers and fail to account for whether unionized workers are actually covered by collective bargaining agreements.

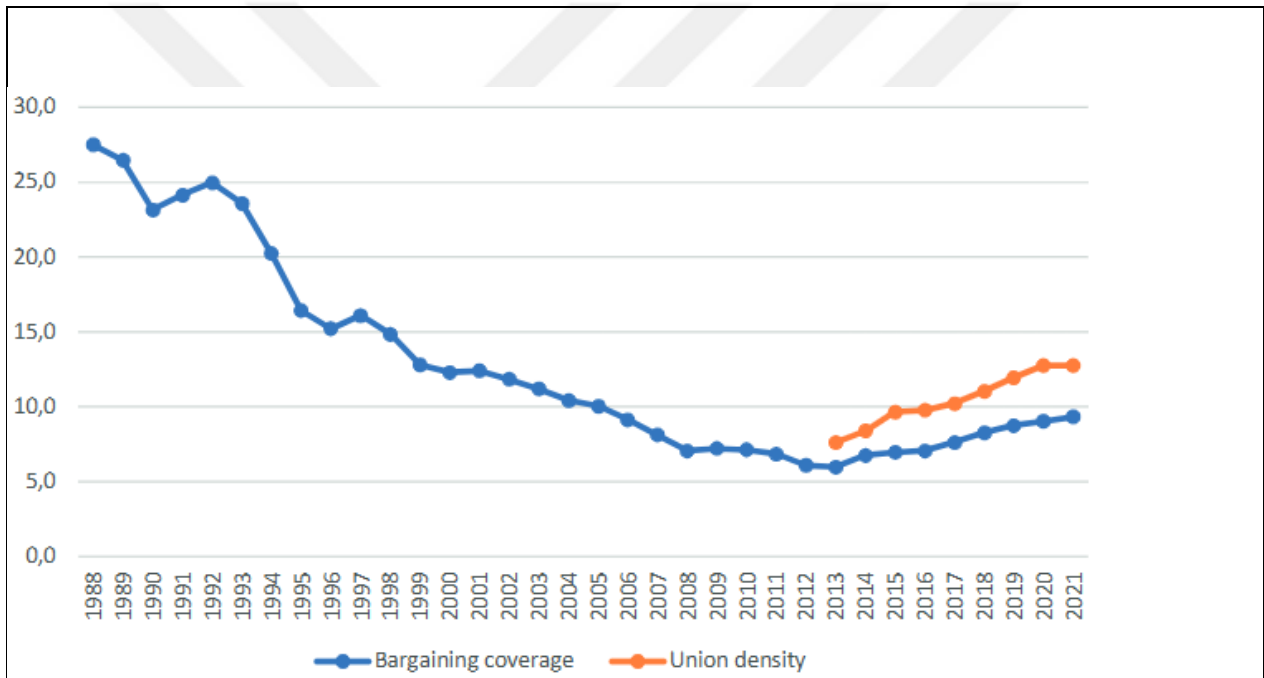


Figure 3.6 Collective bargaining coverage and union density, 1988-2021 (% of the workers)
Source: Birelma, 2022

¹³⁸ A. Çelik and K. Lordoğlu, "Türkiye'de Resmi Sendikalaşma İstatistiklerinin Sorunları Üstüne," *Çalışma ve Toplum* 2 (2006): 11-30.

A more accurate indicator of the labor movement's decline can be found in collective bargaining coverage. As shown in Figure 3.6, the coverage dropped steadily from 26.9% in 1988 to 6.7% in 2012, with only a slight increase to around 10% by 2021. Besides that, as shown in Figure 7, collective agreement coverage in the private sector has remained consistently low, while the modest rise in public-sector coverage has largely been driven by unions aligned with or favored by the government. Today, nearly 90% of private-sector workers fall outside the scope of collective bargaining, reflecting the marginalization of independent unionism and the broader erosion of collective labor rights under authoritarian neoliberalism.

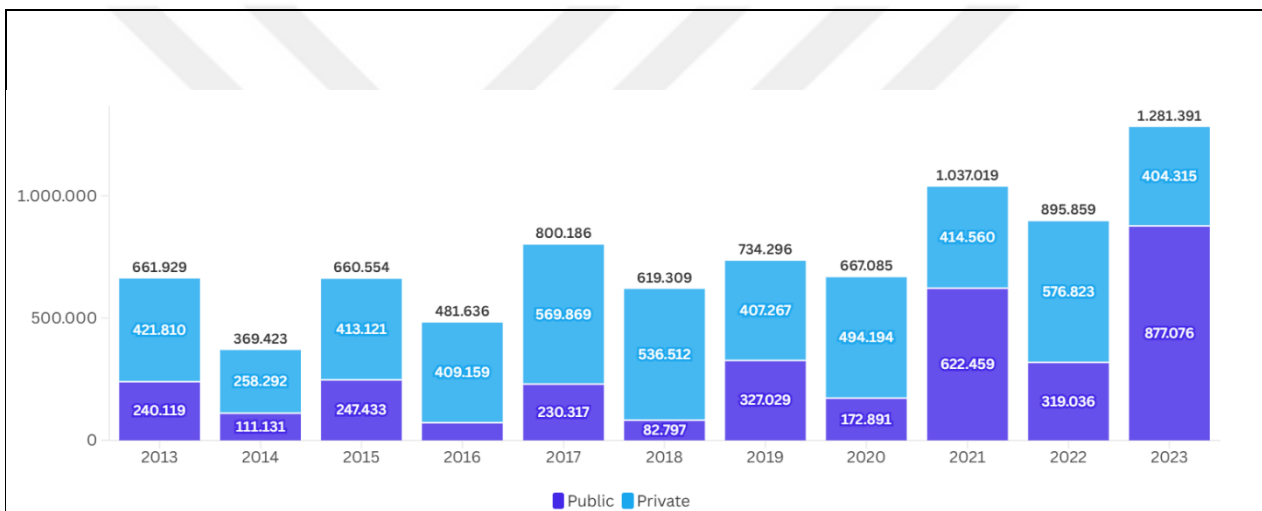


Figure 3.7 Collective agreements scope by sector, 2013-2023 Source: Ministry of Labor and Social Security, Working Life Statistics, 2023

On the other hand, while the simplification and digitalization of the union membership system made the data provided by the Ministry more reliable, paving the way for public and private sector unions favored by the AKP caused an artificial increase in unionization rates. Despite unionization in the private sector has declined dramatically compared to the 1980s and the 1990s, union membership among public employees has increased significantly, mainly because of the new members of the MEMURSEN (The Confederation of Public Servants' Trade Unions), a

confederation which was established in 1995 and had developed a symbiotic relationship with the AKP by the 2000s¹³⁹. The remaining union confederations have lost ground, either because of harsh government pressure or the inability to compete with the government-sponsored unions. Consequently, nearly 75% of all union employees and public servants in Turkey belong to unions that are managed by union leaders affiliated with the ruling coalition headed by the AKP¹⁴⁰. Therefore, the AKP government has produced the consent of the working people by realizing partial improvements in working conditions through the collaborationist and partisan unions, while shaving the combative sides of the labor title.

This pattern aligns with the tightening legal and institutional constraints on labor organizing, particularly the dual-threshold requirement for collective bargaining authorization. As discussed earlier, protracted competency lawsuits and administrative delays imposed by the Ministry of Labor have frequently paralyzed union activity. Employers have exploited these procedural barriers to pursue de-unionization strategies, including mass dismissals and pressure campaigns to force resignations. The sharp decline in unionization rates in the early 2000s coincided with the rise of the AKP government and its pro-employer labor agenda, which promoted subcontracting and precarious work. This fragmentation of the labor force has significantly weakened union capacity and further entrenched employer dominance over labor relations.

Revised legislations on unions also retained extensive strike prohibitions. Bans on strikes in sectors such as water, electricity, gas, banking, and education were preserved. Moreover, the government retained its authority to suspend strikes on the grounds of national security and public health. Consequently, these legal changes not only raised membership

¹³⁹ Çelik, "Turkey's New Labour Regime Under the Justice and Development Party in the First Decade of the Twenty-First Century: Authoritarian Flexibilization."

¹⁴⁰ Birelma, "Turkey's Rising Tide of Dissent: Charting the Wave of Non-Legal Strikes in the Mid-2010s."

barriers for unions but also further weakened their ability to engage in collective bargaining and defend workers' rights¹⁴¹.

Following the 2016 coup attempt, national security rhetoric was utilized to justify the suppression and prohibition of strikes, particularly during the state of emergency. On 21 July 2016, the Turkish government declared a nationwide state of emergency in response to the failed coup attempt of 15 July, claiming the urgent need to eliminate all factions linked to the attempted coup. This extraordinary legal framework remained in place for nearly two years, significantly enhancing executive authority while curtailing or suspending constitutional rights, including those related to peaceful assembly, protest, and striking. Even before the imposition of the state of emergency in July 2016, the AKP government had already 'postponed' eight strikes¹⁴². Following the initial declaration, the state of emergency was extended five times, and between July 2016 and February 2018, six additional strikes were deferred. In Turkey, such strike deferrals effectively function as strike bans, and their scope was further expanded through an emergency decree, intensifying restrictions on labor rights¹⁴³. Accordingly, President Erdoğan once said in 2017:

"We use the state of emergency for the businesspeople's benefit. Let me ask: Do you encounter any trouble, any delays in the business world [now]? When we assumed power [in 2002], there was [also] a state of emergency in Turkey, but all the factories were facing the threat of strikes. Remember those days. But now, thanks to the state of emergency, we immediately intervene in those workplaces that face the threat of strikes. Because you cannot undermine our business. We use the state of emergency for this purpose."¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Bozkurt - Güngen, "Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities Under the AKP Governments in Turkey."

¹⁴² Arslanalp and Erkmen, "Repression without Exception: A Study of Protest Bans during Turkey's State of Emergency (2016-2018)."

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Bozkurt - Güngen, "Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities Under the AKP Governments in Turkey."

Strike bans are a specific part of a broader policy of banning demonstrations. But in general, the AKP has also limited political opposition by banning protests as well as strikes after 2015, especially during the state of emergency and the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to preventing the public expression of political criticism and discontent in the form of strikes, demonstrations and protests, the use of coercive apparatuses such as the imprisonment of political organizations and trade unionists, and the imprisonment of activists on charges of “opposing the law on demonstrations” have also contributed to the suppression of opposition in general and class opposition in particular.

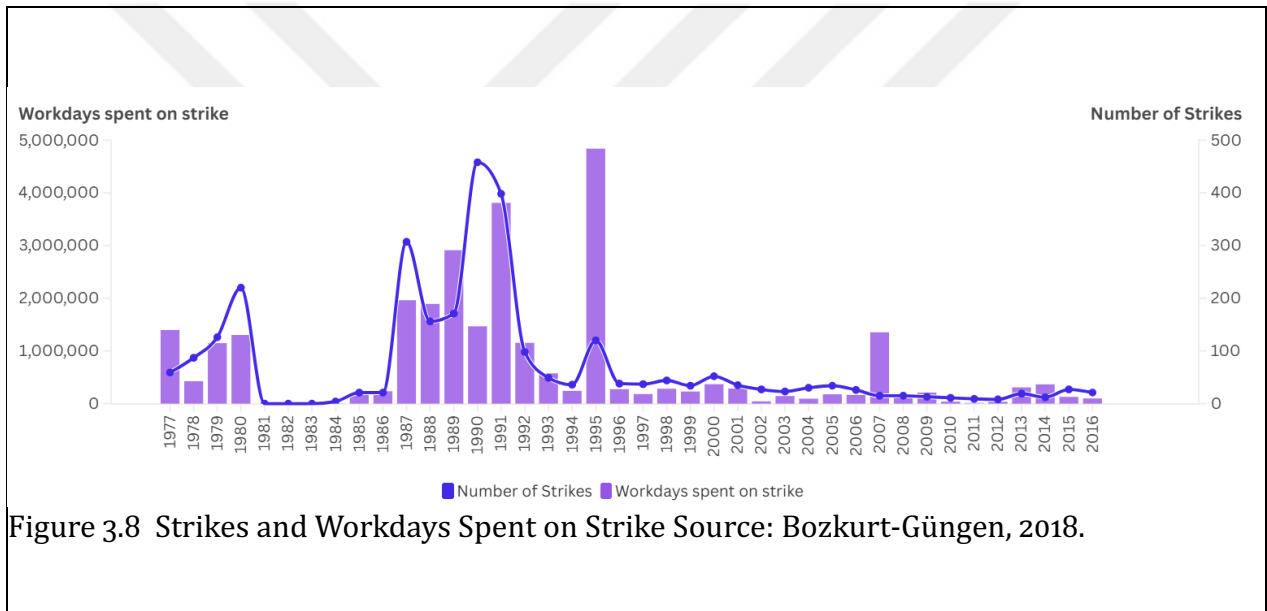


Figure 3.8 Strikes and Workdays Spent on Strike Source: Bozkurt-Güngen, 2018.

As can be seen in Figure 3.8, the increase in the number of strikes and strike days observed from 1977 to 1980 abruptly vanished with the military coup of 1980. The number of strikes and strike days then rose again towards the end of that decade, fluctuating throughout the 1990s. The number of strikes, which peaked in 1995, has since declined sharply. Between 2000 and 2016, the only increase was in 2007. The decline during this period was a result of all the regulations implemented within the scope of authoritarian flexibility mentioned above.

In sum, the transformation of collective labor relations under AKP rule exemplifies the logic of authoritarian flexibility in its most institutionalized form. By retaining the post-1980 legal architecture while introducing new procedural and bureaucratic barriers, the regime systematically hollowed out the capacity of unions to engage in meaningful collective bargaining, organize freely, or exercise the right to strike. This environment not only constrained militant unionism but also enabled the consolidation of collaborationist unions aligned with the ruling party, thereby reshaping the representational structure of labor from above. The strategic function of these reforms was not merely to discipline labor but to reorganize the union field in a way that integrated it into the authoritarian neoliberal project. As the next section will demonstrate, this institutional redesign did not reflect a neutral weakening of all unions but instead produced a highly uneven landscape of union membership and representation, favoring pro-government actors and marginalizing independent labor voices.

3.3.2.3 Roots of Revitalization Under the AKP Rule

While the AKP era has been largely defined by the repression, fragmentation, and depoliticization of the labor movement, it has also incubated the underlying tensions and contradictions that would give rise to new forms of resistance. This section explores the roots of labor revitalization in Turkey by examining two distinct yet interrelated dynamics that unfolded during the 2000s and early 2010s. On the one hand, unions trapped between the market and society poles pursued moderate, compromise-based strategies to preserve their relevance within a restrictive political and legal environment. On the other hand, episodic but powerful eruptions of class-based mobilization—most notably the TEKEK resistance and the Metal Storm—demonstrated the persistent potential for militant labor agency. Together, these developments reflect the uneven terrain upon which revitalization would later be constructed: one marked by both strategic accommodation and insurgent defiance. By

situating these dynamics within Hyman's framework, this section sheds light on the contradictory processes that laid the groundwork for the resurgence of combative and independent unionism in the following decade.

We have already explained in the chapter 3.2 how, between 1980 and 2002, unions were structurally dislocated from the class pole, that is, from the uncompromising class opposition trade unionism. In the post-2002 AKP period, many of the conditions that hindered trade union struggle in that period have deepened. The pressure on unions has increased, the union environment has become more determined by flexibilization, precarization, subcontracting, anti-unionism and authoritarian conditions. In such an environment, unions, which had already lost their militancy and class polarity, began to embrace sectoral bargaining opportunities, leaning more towards the market pole. On the other hand, government-backed unions found more grounds to organize than ever before during the AKP period.

During the EU membership process in the early 2000s, many unions adopted new orientations around the concept of "social integration and dialogue" and began to lean on the society pole as well as the market pole. As part of the EU membership process, the number of trade unions adopting the proposal to establish dialogues between the state, trade unions and employers, or expecting a positive outcome, has increased considerably. In this respect, it is important to underline that since 2002, unions in Turkey have been located on the compromising axis between the market and society corners of the triangle and have moved as far away from the class pole as possible.

Between The Market and The Society Poles: Compromising Axis

In response to the challenges posed by union repression and the flexible, outsourcing-based labor regime, unions or their grassroots have always been in a quest for a proper response, organizing the working class, elevating the struggle. This chapter will attempt to contextualize the current revitalization by providing an account of the first snapshots of the

trade union movement's departure from the compromising axis. The first instances of opposing AKP's neoliberal authoritarianism from labor movement will be assessed as their characteristics, strategic orientations and action repertoires.

While subcontracting was significantly eroding the power of organized labor, some unions in different sectors tried to protect their some workers at least who were in essential roles in the sector, rather than opposing subcontracting as a whole. For instance, PETROL-İŞ maintained its organizing efforts in core petrochemical roles, a sector significantly reliant on subcontracting, successfully preventing the outsourcing of these key positions. However, the union adopted a more accommodating stance regarding subcontracting in peripheral roles such as catering and cleaning. Similarly, BİRLEŞİK METAL-İŞ opposed subcontracting where possible but, in some cases, shifted its focus toward unionizing part-time workers rather than directly contesting subcontracting practices. KRİSTAL-İŞ, facing employer resistance, attempted to negotiate distinct rights for subcontracted employees but ultimately prioritized protecting the rights of permanent workers to sustain bargaining channels with employers¹⁴⁵. These examples are market bargainer stances towards subcontracting, illustrating both the weakness hindering resistance to subcontracting and the choice of accommodation.

Conversely, Nestlé workers' strike with TEKGIDA-İŞ in 2016 demonstrates how can class opposition or any kind of militancy can be adequate to change laboring conditions in a specific workplace (or sector). The conflict originated in 2014 when a group of Nestlé Food workers opposed a collective agreement signed by ÖZ GIDA-İŞ, a collaborationist union affiliated with HAK-İŞ. TEKGIDA-İŞ encouraged these workers to join its ranks for protection; however, 23 workers were subsequently dismissed to prevent the organization of TEKGIDA-İŞ in the workplace. In response, TEKGIDA-İŞ initiated protests, mobilized public support, and provided financial assistance to the dismissed workers for 13 months, ultimately

¹⁴⁵ Gürcan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

securing their reinstatement. This success led to a surge in membership at TEKGIDA-İŞ, making it the officially recognized union at the workplace¹⁴⁶.

Once authorized, TEKGIDA-İŞ demanded revisions to the previous collective agreement, revealing that 540 out of 900 Nestlé workers were earning minimum wage and that the company extensively relied on on-call labor with no additional benefits. Workers were summoned to duty with only four hours' notice, a practice formally embedded in the earlier agreement. TEKGIDA-İŞ advocated for a phased reduction in on-call employment, replacing it with short-term contracts lasting three to six months. The 11-day strike at Nestlé in July 2016 concluded with TEKGIDA-İŞ securing a notable victory: a 475 TL wage increase and a commitment to transition all on-call employees to permanent staff positions by 2018¹⁴⁷.

Despite militant Nestle strike, it can't be said that TEKGIDA-İŞ was a class oppositional union. Rather, it was a mixture of class and market poles, with an outweigh of market bargaining tendency. Initially centered on organizing public sector workers in agri-food enterprises, TEKGIDA-İŞ began shifting its focus toward the private sector in the early 1990s, anticipating that privatization would eventually reduce the public sector's significance. This strategic transition initially encountered resistance from TEKEL workers, who were skeptical of the union's new direction. Despite this opposition, TEKGIDA-İŞ expanded into the private sector, leading notable labor actions such as the Yörsan strike in 2006, the Perfetti resistance, and protests at the UNO Bread Factory in the early 2000s. Union officials highlighted the considerable effort required for organizing in a new sector, emphasizing TEKGIDA-İŞ's six-year campaign at Coca-Cola before finally gaining a seat at the bargaining table¹⁴⁸.

To conclude, the post-2002 period witnessed a strategic recalibration within the Turkish labor movement, marked by a retreat from class-

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Gürcan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

based oppositional politics and a growing orientation toward market and society poles. While some unions sought accommodation through legalistic engagement, project-based advocacy, or corporatist bargaining, others were structurally neutralized by pro-government co-optation. These shifts facilitated the AKP's authoritarian consolidation by fragmenting labor's collective voice and depoliticizing its demands. The strategic ambivalence that defined this "compromising axis" ultimately failed to counterbalance the combined forces of state repression and neoliberal restructuring. Nonetheless, the limitations of this orientation would become increasingly visible in the 2020s, as grassroots initiatives and independent unions began to reassert more confrontational, bottom-up strategies—challenging the very compromises that defined the previous era.

Reborn of The Class Opposition: TEKEL and Metal Storm

As examined in the previous sections, the authoritarian restructuring of labor relations—anchored in restrictive union laws, privatization, and market-oriented reforms—severely curtailed the working class's collective agency. The AKP era further deepened this trajectory through the consolidation of authoritarian neoliberalism and the proliferation of precarious labor regimes. However, despite this repressive environment, moments of intense and visible class-based opposition did emerge in the 2000s and 2010s, signaling a partial reactivation of the class pole within the labor movement. This section focuses on two of the most significant labor mobilizations of the AKP period: the TEKEL resistance (2009–2010) and the Metal Workers' Uprising known as the "Metal Storm" (2015). These episodes not only disrupted the narrative of labor's decline but also revealed the potential for bottom-up, militant organizing to challenge both state repression and collaborationist union structures. By analyzing these mobilizations, this section highlights how class opposition—though episodic and constrained—was reborn through new repertoires of resistance and strategic defiance.

Yalman and Topal¹⁴⁹ claimed that the labor movement have not been able to develop a conclusive resistance during the AKP era: trade union life in Turkey was in “crisis”. Until 2020s, there have been few workers' resistances in Turkey that have overcome the crisis of the working class, been able to pass their demands, to mobilize mass workers, to make a lasting gain in the relevant sector, or to push back the capitalist forces. The contemporary labor movement in Turkey witnessed such two significant moments of resistance of class opposition under the AKP rule: the TEKEK resistance in 2009–2010, and the metal workers' resistance in 2015.

The TEKEK resistance (2009–10) and the Metal Storm wildcat strikes (2015) are distinctively important because they represent rare but pivotal breaks from Turkey's prevailing labor regime under AKP rule, characterized by bureaucratic unionism and neoliberal containment. Both mobilizations emerged from grassroots worker initiatives that defied and bypassed official unions—TEKGIDA-İŞ in the case of TEKEK and TÜRK METAL in the case of Metal Storm—revealing a strategic shift toward class-oriented, bottom-up organizing. These actions challenged the legitimacy of pro-government unions and employer-dominated industrial relations, reasserting workers' associative and communicative power. While limited in scope and generalization, they disrupted the hegemonic consensus between the state, employers, and unions, exposed the cracks in corporatist labor control, and fostered worker-led solidarities that would inspire subsequent forms of decentralized and militant labor resistance. Analyzed through Hyman's¹⁵⁰ framework, they signify a rupture from market- and society-oriented strategies toward renewed class confrontation.

The most serious reaction to the privatization came from Tekel workers at the end of 2009. This protest, which endured for 78 days in the harsh winter on one of Ankara's busiest streets, was seen from various angles as a highly significant event that would influence Turkey's political

¹⁴⁹ Galip L. Yalman and Aylin Topal, “Labour Containment Strategies and Working Class Struggles in the Neoliberal Era: The Case of TEKEK Workers in Turkey,” *Critical Sociology* 45, no. 3 (2019): 447–61.

¹⁵⁰ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

landscape as well as the evolution of labor union activism, garnering widespread attention¹⁵¹. TEKEL workers from 11 cities traveled to Ankara in 106 buses and staged a 78-day occupation in Kızılay Square. The encampment garnered significant support from various civil and political groups, particularly left-wing youth organizations. Similar to the prior Spring Actions, the TEKEL resistance arose as a grassroots movement that challenged the TÜRK-İŞ and its affiliate, TEKGIDA-İŞ leadership, which faced criticism for not adequately supporting workers and having a tendency to collaborate with the government¹⁵². The privatization of TEKEL and the resulting resistance represent a pivotal moment regarding the neoliberal reconfiguration of the employment framework and methods to undermine the labor movement. The TEKEL resistance should be seen as a crucial moment in which the AKP government's stance towards any form of social dissent became more defined and intensified.

The 2009 resistance was the end of a long-term process. During the long process of privatization of TEKEL factories, TEKGIDA-İŞ organized many actions and achieved partial gains. But at the same time, TEKGIDA-İŞ's closed-door negotiations with the government over the privatization program led to a rift between unionized workers and the union. It is therefore a matter of debate to what extent union leaders contributed to the strategizing of the 2009 actions. According to Yalman and Topal¹⁵³, the 2009 protests were a staging ground for the tension between the confederation and the union and the workers.

¹⁵¹ Gürcan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*; Yalman and Topal, "Labour Containment Strategies and Working Class Struggles in the Neoliberal Era: The Case of TEKEL Workers in Turkey."

¹⁵² Aziz Çelik, *Türkiye'de 2000'li Yıllarda Grevler ve Grev Dışı Eylemler: Çalışma Hayatında "Pax Romana" Mı?* (2012); Gürcan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*; Yalman and Topal, "Labour Containment Strategies and Working Class Struggles in the Neoliberal Era: The Case of TEKEL Workers in Turkey."

¹⁵³ Yalman and Topal, "Labour Containment Strategies and Working Class Struggles in the Neoliberal Era: The Case of TEKEL Workers in Turkey."

On November 2, 2009, the Privatization Administration announced that TEKEL factories would be closed down and workers' employment contracts would be terminated as of January 31, 2010. In response, TEKGIDA-İŞ's Union's General Executive Board, branch presidents and provincial representatives convened on November 16, 2009, to determine their strategy. During this process, TEKGIDA-İŞ conveyed its demand for the 'Seka Model', which includes the transfer of workers to other public institutions and organizations close to their workplaces along with their personal rights, to the authorities through both public and private means. They also announced in their statement that if these demands are not met, they and their union members will 'resort to any legitimate and result-oriented method of struggle' and that for this reason, 'each and every one of the union members should be ready to participate in the struggle activities that will be implemented if necessary'¹⁵⁴. Less than two weeks after the union's announcement, TEKEL workers arrived in Ankara on December 15, 2009, with 106 buses from 11 provinces. The workers, who were not allowed to enter the city, overcame police barricades and marched towards the AKP headquarters. The workers, who were also subjected to police violence there, marched towards the city center and continued their protest in Abdi İpekçi Park for 4 days. In this process, in response to the reaction from various social segments against the police violence and the support given to the TEKEL workers, the government increased the minimum annual employment periods of workers to be hired temporarily in other public institutions in order to end the protests.

This attitude of the government strengthened the hopes of the workers that they could achieve gains by resisting. On the 5th day of the strike, workers began a sit-in protest in front of TÜRK-İŞ headquarters. With the arrival of the frosty winter days in Ankara, the workers continued the sit-in and started to set up tents for shelter at night. And from the 38th day of the action, Sakarya Street and its vicinity became a tent city.

In addition to a small improvement in the duration of employment on the 4th day of the resistance, the union was called to the negotiating table

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

on January 28 (the 48th day) in order to stop the resistance. The union leaders, who responded to the call with the condition that rights could not be the subject of negotiations, were told that the workers who would leave TEKEL for temporary employment would be paid severance and notice pay, and would be entitled to 22 days of paid leave, but that the period in which workers had to apply for temporary employment would be shortened by a decision of the Council of Ministers.

From the day of this meeting, the government, and especially the then Prime Minister Erdoğan, hardened its attitude towards the TEKEL workers. Erdoğan stated that TEKEL workers were being used by terrorist organizations and that they should put an end to this and return home. This attitude of the government has been the determinant of the AKP's strategy against all opposition groups and movements that oppose its decisions and practices ever since¹⁵⁵.

On March 1, 2010, just one day before the expiration of the government's designated application period to temporary employment, the Council of State annulled its execution on the basis that the deadline was illegal. The decision made by the Council of State was seen as a partial success. TEKGIDA-İŞ's General President Mustafa Türkel declared that a new phase had commenced in the TEKEL struggle, while simultaneously, despite some workers' objections, the tents began to be taken down. Türkel stated that the resistance was not finished and that the workers would return to Ankara a month later; however, on April 1, Prime Minister Erdoğan declared that they would not permit the same situation to occur again. Both parties honored their commitments; the Tekel workers arrived in Ankara on April 1, but their buses were prohibited from entering the city. In response, the workers attempted to walk to the city center to make a press announcement, but once again, they faced violence from the law enforcement. The center of Ankara was engulfed in a thick cloud of tear gas. The TEKEL workers, after being pushed back by the security forces on April 1, returned to their homes without even being able to issue

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

a press statement and were unable to organize resistance at such a scale again¹⁵⁶.

The 78-day Tekel resistance has been described as a significant awakening of the militant attitude among the Turkish working class¹⁵⁷. Since the 1980s, the workers' tents for the first time have served as a gathering place for all opposition movements and groups that have faced marginalization during this period. This resistance fostered the creation of an inclusive solidarity network that united various social segments that had previously not come together. Efforts were made to establish democratic coordination between the tents of workers from different provinces.

Yalman and Topal¹⁵⁸ criticized the TEKEL protests as it was a conflict centered on the specific economic interests of a limited group of workers while greeting its grassroots-based mobilization. They claimed that the workers took part in the sit-in in Ankara to safeguard personal rights they perceived were under threat. However, this struggle could not be generalized to include all former workers of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) affected by privatization. In essence, the resistance represented only the TEKEL workers and did not encompass all those experiencing temporary employment, that is, the struggle couldn't be generalized to the Additionally, only a tenth of the Tekel workforce actively engaged in the resistance. Consequently, this struggle, being confined to a small cohort of workers, was not likely to evolve into a broader social movement.

Nonetheless, some perceived that the TEKEL resistance held the potential to develop into a collective struggle for the working class against neoliberalism. Öngen, for instance, contended that the primary goal should be to widen and enhance the fight for economic personal rights, which at that moment only pertained to a specific faction of the working class. Öngen stressed that without such expansion, workers would not secure significant benefits, and their endeavors could fade from collective

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

social consciousness¹⁵⁹. Furthermore, the TEKEL employees had already cultivated a sense of collective identity due to their experiences in the workplace prior to their fight against privatization. Initial feelings, such as a sense of unfairness and the understanding that the company benefits from their labor, did not evolve into questioning who owns the means of production. However, these feelings did give rise to disputes regarding how the workday and leisure time were organized. The resistance process also served as a learning experience for workers, helping them to recognize their own economic, social, and political circumstances.

Their struggles changed their relationships with their surroundings and influenced their social and political perspectives. It was often noted that they became more aware of different social groups. They experienced a shift, growing increasingly sensitive to the social issues stemming from divisions related to gender, ethnicity, and sectarianism. Despite the deep political divides, the TEKEL resistance overcame ethno-political barriers among workers. Many TEKEL workers, previously AKP supporters and divided by ethnic identities as Turks and Kurds, later acknowledged that the TEKEL experience transformed their consciousness, challenging nationalist prejudices and fostering solidarity across political lines¹⁶⁰. Ultimately, the struggle led some workers to perceive themselves as part of the broader class struggle, encapsulated in the sentiment “I am not fighting just for my own labor or work, but for the labor of all humanity.” Nevertheless, this heightened awareness was not a transformation shared by most workers. A considerable number of TEKEL employees viewed themselves as “victims of privatization,” but they did not attribute this victimization to the broader consequences of privatization and neoliberal policies; instead, they saw it merely as an unfortunate event that happened to them individually (Topal and Yalman, 2015).

¹⁵⁹ as cited in A. Topal and Galip L. Yalman, “2009–2010 Tekel İşçileri Direnişi, Öncesi ve Sonrası: Toplumsal Farkındalıktan, Özelleştirme Mağduriyetine,” in *Türkiye Ekonomisinin Dünü Bugünü Yarını* (Ankara: İmge, 2015), 401–26.

¹⁶⁰ Gürcan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*.

Topal and Yalman¹⁶¹ argue that the leading workers at TEKEL played a crucial role in organizing and sustaining the action through bottom-up efforts. They assert that the decision to travel to Ankara was one that the workers compelled the union managers to make. Furthermore, even when the workers protested in front of the TÜRK-İŞ building, there was a clear intention to pressure the union into taking a stand, indicating that the action was, in part, a challenge to Türk-İş management. Additionally, during this process, many workers voiced their criticism of the union they were a part of, feeling that it was not combative enough in its approach.

Although the TEKEL protest ultimately failed to secure workers' demands for job security and improved working conditions, its significance transcended this outcome. The reluctance of union leadership (both in TÜRK-İŞ and TEKGIDA-İŞ) and the AKP government's coercive tactics played a crucial role in the protest's failure. Nonetheless, the TEKEL resistance remains pivotal in the history of Turkish labor struggles due to its lasting impact on working-class consciousness. The Kızılay encampment reinvigorated leftist militancy and fostered an unprecedented sense of unity among workers.

In sum, the TEKEL resistance constitutes a remarkable instance of strategic reorientation within Turkey's labor movement, reflecting a shift from market orientation constituted with institutional inertia toward class opposition of grassroots agency. The protest exemplifies a bottom-up challenge to union leadership, where workers exercised associative power by pressuring their own representatives and reasserting control over the direction of collective action. Although the official union strategy remained largely accommodationist and state-oriented, the TEKEL workers' initiative embodied a grassroots challenge, mobilizing horizontal networks of solidarity and independent coordination across provincial lines. Despite its ultimate inability to generalize beyond the specific workforce involved, the TEKEL protest revealed the latent capacity for

¹⁶¹ Topal and Yalman, "2009–2010 Tekel İşçileri Direnişi, Öncesi ve Sonrası: Toplumsal Farkındalıktan, Özelleştirme Mağduriyetine."

class-based mobilization and challenged both state repression and union bureaucratization. It thus stands as a critical episode that exposed the contradictions of Turkey's neoliberal labor regime and marked a potential—albeit limited—rupture in the reproduction of union passivity.

The final significant instance of working-class resistance in Turkey prior to the COVID-19 pandemic was a non-legal strike wave in the metal industry between 2012 and 2016 since thousands of workers in the automobile companies in Bursa have refused to accept the clauses of a new collective agreement. As a part of the strike wave, during May and June of 2015, the Metal Storm erupted which involved 35,000 metal workers across 21 different workplaces, leaving a lasting mark on the nation's labor movements. These mobilisations were organised without the support or approval of the union to which the workers were affiliated, in this case TÜRK METAL, affiliated to the TÜRK-İŞ. TÜRK METAL is the largest metalworkers' union in Turkey, boasting around 177,000 members during the Metal Storm¹⁶². The union is known for its ultra-nationalism and authoritarian leadership, and there have been several instances where metalworkers attempted to join different unions but were unsuccessful due to collaboration between the union and employers¹⁶³.

As an example and starting point of wave of wildcat strikes, in 2012, BİRLEŞİK METAL-İŞ organized some demonstrations at the Renault plant. On November 12, workers at the Renault factory halted work and gathered in the factory square to demand a revision of the collective agreement draft and the resignation of Türk Metal. The demonstration that continued until midnight spread to and was supported by the workers from other shifts. Despite the repression from the factory management and police intervention, the workers chose to remain on strike and managed to contact the different shifts. However, their demonstrations resulted in 33 workers being dismissed¹⁶⁴.

¹⁶² Birelma, "Turkey's Rising Tide of Dissent: Charting the Wave of Non-Legal Strikes in the Mid-2010s."

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Isil Erdinc, "Local Dynamics as a Resource for Labour Protests: The Case of Wildcat Strikes in the Metal Industry in Turkey, 2012-2016," *Global Labour Journal* 11, no. 3 (2020).

In December 2014, TÜRK METAL and MESS entered into a collective agreement effective from 2014 to 2017. ÇELİK-İŞ, a union closely aligned with the government that represents a limited number of companies, also signed the agreement. In contrast, BİRLEŞİK METAL-İŞ opposed it, primarily due to concerns over the conditions for wage increases and the length of the agreement. On 29 January 2015, BİRLEŞİK METAL-İŞ initiated a strike at twenty-two companies within the metal industry, with sixteen additional companies joining the call by 19 February. The executive committee of DİSK expressed its support for the striking workers. However, on 30 January 2015, the government suspended the strike—which involved 15,000 workers across forty-eight plants—citing “national security” concerns. This marked the seventh strike suspended by the government in thirteen years. The wildcat strikes in Bursa provided metalworkers with a platform to express their grievances and influence the balance of power among workplace unions¹⁶⁵.

The conflict between employers and workers in the metal industry reached its peak in April 2015, following the signing of a collective agreement between Bosch and TÜRK METAL. This agreement was essential in preventing members from leaving TÜRK METAL for its rival, BİRLEŞİK METAL-İŞ, particularly after some Bosch workers made that switch in late 2014. As both unions awaited a Labor Court decision regarding which held the majority to negotiate factory agreements, TÜRK METAL responded by proposing a higher wage increase (Birelma, 2025; Erdinç, 2020; Güler and Tokol, 2016).

When word of this agreement spread to other factories, Renault workers affiliated with TÜRK METAL demanded similar rights but were informed they would have to wait until 2017 for the next bargaining period. This dissatisfaction led to protests at the Renault plant in April 2015, supported by other metal workers. MESS labeled the strikes as “illegal,” resulting in the dismissal of striking workers at Renault. In retaliation, more workers joined the protests, culminating in a significant wildcat strike by Renault workers in Bursa that commenced in May 2015, without

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

TÜRK METAL's endorsement. Thousands of workers from various metal factories participated in these protests, which lasted from May 14 to June 1 and spread to nearby cities¹⁶⁶.

The workers' demands extended to several other factories, including the Renault Plant, evolved from mere wage hikes to calls for the removal of TÜRK METAL from the affected workplaces. Although Renault workers succeeded in meeting their wage demands and ousting TÜRK METAL by joining BİRLEŞİK METAL-İŞ, many other workers linked with Koç Holding were dismissed despite their initial wage improvements. The resistance of metal workers not only inflicted considerable damage on the longstanding coalition among the state, employers, and compliant unions but also shattered the pervasive fear surrounding the previously untouchable status of the AKP government among its own supporters¹⁶⁷.

The wildcat strikes and protests by workers have resulted in a shift in the power dynamics within the trade union landscape. The breakdown of the social dialogue framework and its manipulation by the AKP government have diminished the credibility of the dominant players in Bursa's metal industry, namely the pro-government trade unions and employer associations. During a visit to Bursa amid the mobilizations, the president of TÜRK METAL faced boos from the union members affiliated with him. The union has begun to see a reduction in its membership as striking workers have departed from TÜRK METAL. Some of these workers joined BİRLEŞİK METAL-İŞ, while others expressed a desire to disengage from any trade union altogether, stating that "trade unions ignore the workers'

¹⁶⁶ Birelma, "Turkey's Rising Tide of Dissent: Charting the Wave of Non-Legal Strikes in the Mid-2010s"; Aysen Tokol and Ceyhun Güler, "İşçilerin Gözünden Bir Direniş Hikayesi: 2015 Metal Direnişi," *Atatürk Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Dergisi* 30 (December 2020): 935–68; Erdinc, "Local Dynamics as a Resource for Labour Protests: The Case of Wildcat Strikes in the Metal Industry in Turkey, 2012-2016."

¹⁶⁷ Gürçan and Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*; Birelma, "Turkey's Rising Tide of Dissent: Charting the Wave of Non-Legal Strikes in the Mid-2010s."

demands and are only focused on their own interests and the benefits they receive from the state and employers¹⁶⁸”.

Official data indicates that between January and July 2015, TÜRK METAL's membership decreased from 177,125 to 166,250. Meanwhile, BİRLEŞİK METAL-İŞ gained 5,471 new members, raising its total membership to 31,066 workers (Güler and Tokol, 2016). TÜRK METAL lost its majority at the Renault facility in Bursa, as BİRLEŞİK METAL-İŞ secured a majority in several companies due to its backing of the striking workers.

One consequence of the strikes involving employers and automotive companies was the scrutiny of the legitimacy and significance of the MESS. From the very first day of the strike, several companies opted to exit the MESS and entered into separate collective agreements by negotiating directly with BİRLEŞİK METAL-İŞ. Subsequently, the workers who work at those companies declared the strike over and returned to their production activities¹⁶⁹.

Another outcome of the wildcat strike was the enhancement of the workers' working and living conditions. Following the strikes, there has been a noticeable improvement in the conditions for workers at the company level. Companies that reached a new agreement with the striking workers, regardless of MESS or TÜRK METAL, agreed to provide a wage increase for the employees.

Although BİRLEŞİK METAL-İŞ has faced difficulties in securing favorable collective agreements at the national level, the wildcat strikes in Bursa have enabled the union to negotiate more advantageous terms with employers, resulting in a significant wage increase for workers. Therefore Erdinç¹⁷⁰ asserts that the balance of power within trade unions can vary between the national and sectoral levels. While TÜRK METAL remains the predominant union in Turkey's metal sector, BİRLEŞİK METAL-İŞ has successfully established itself as the leading union in Bursa's metal industry. Additionally, the employer organization MESS has

¹⁶⁸ Erdinç, “Local Dynamics as a Resource for Labour Protests: The Case of Wildcat Strikes in the Metal Industry in Turkey, 2012-2016.”

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

experienced a decline in membership among businesses in the Bursa region. Consequently, these wildcat strikes have shifted the balance of power in industrial relations at both the workplace and sectoral levels.

The 2015 wildcat strikes in the metal industry—culminating in the Metal Storm—signaled a profound rupture in Turkey’s corporatist industrial relations system, representing a strategic shift driven by worker agency rather than institutional leadership. Analyzed through Hyman’s¹⁷¹ framework, the actions of metalworkers in Bursa exemplify a direct challenge to the union orientation between market and society poles, which had long favored social dialogue integration with employers and the state¹⁷² over genuine worker representation. The mobilizations embodied a bottom-up and worker-to-worker reconfiguration of power within the union field, as workers not only bypassed TÜRK METAL’s collaborationist structure but also demanded its removal, ultimately leading to a notable shift in power balance within the union field. These autonomous, worker-to-worker initiatives disrupted the traditional alignment between TÜRK METAL, employers, and the AKP government, revealing cracks in the hegemonic labor control apparatus. While not fully generalized beyond Bursa, the strikes transformed local power dynamics, enhanced material conditions at the firm level, and demonstrated the capacity of unmediated worker mobilization to recalibrate the strategic orientation of unions and unsettle established industrial actors.

As shown in Figure 3.9, similar wildcat strikes have been prevalent in 2015, at different sectors, before and after the Metal Storm. Non-legal strike waves began in January 2015, when public sector doctors staged a one-day walkout at the national level. In February, approximately 3,000 workers at a furniture factory in Kayseri engaged in a wildcat strike, protesting inadequate wage increases and defying their union due to its pro-

¹⁷¹ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

¹⁷² Erdinc, “Local Dynamics as a Resource for Labour Protests: The Case of Wildcat Strikes in the Metal Industry in Turkey, 2012-2016.”

employer stance. Similar incidents occurred frequently throughout 2015 and in the subsequent years, though in decreasing numbers¹⁷³.

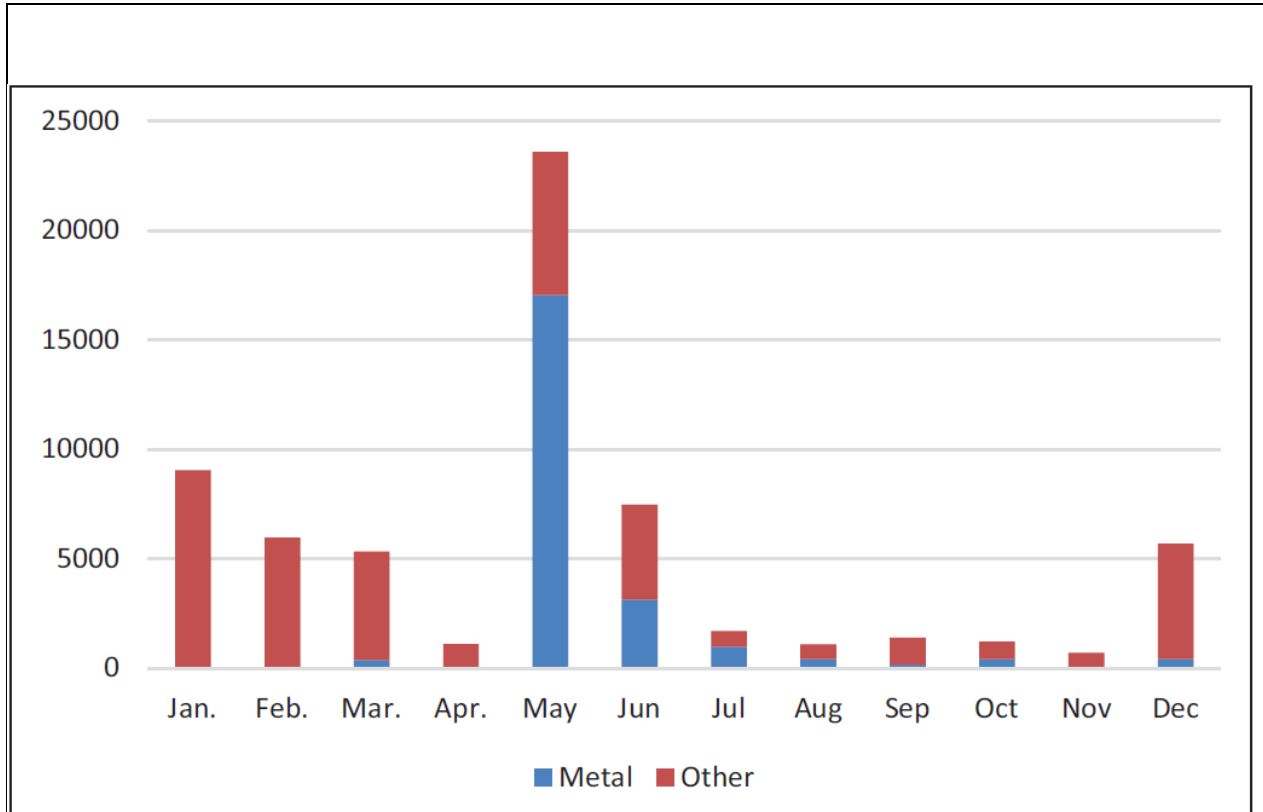


Figure 3.9 Number of workers participating in non-legal strikes in Turkey, monthly, 2015
Source: Birelma, 2025.

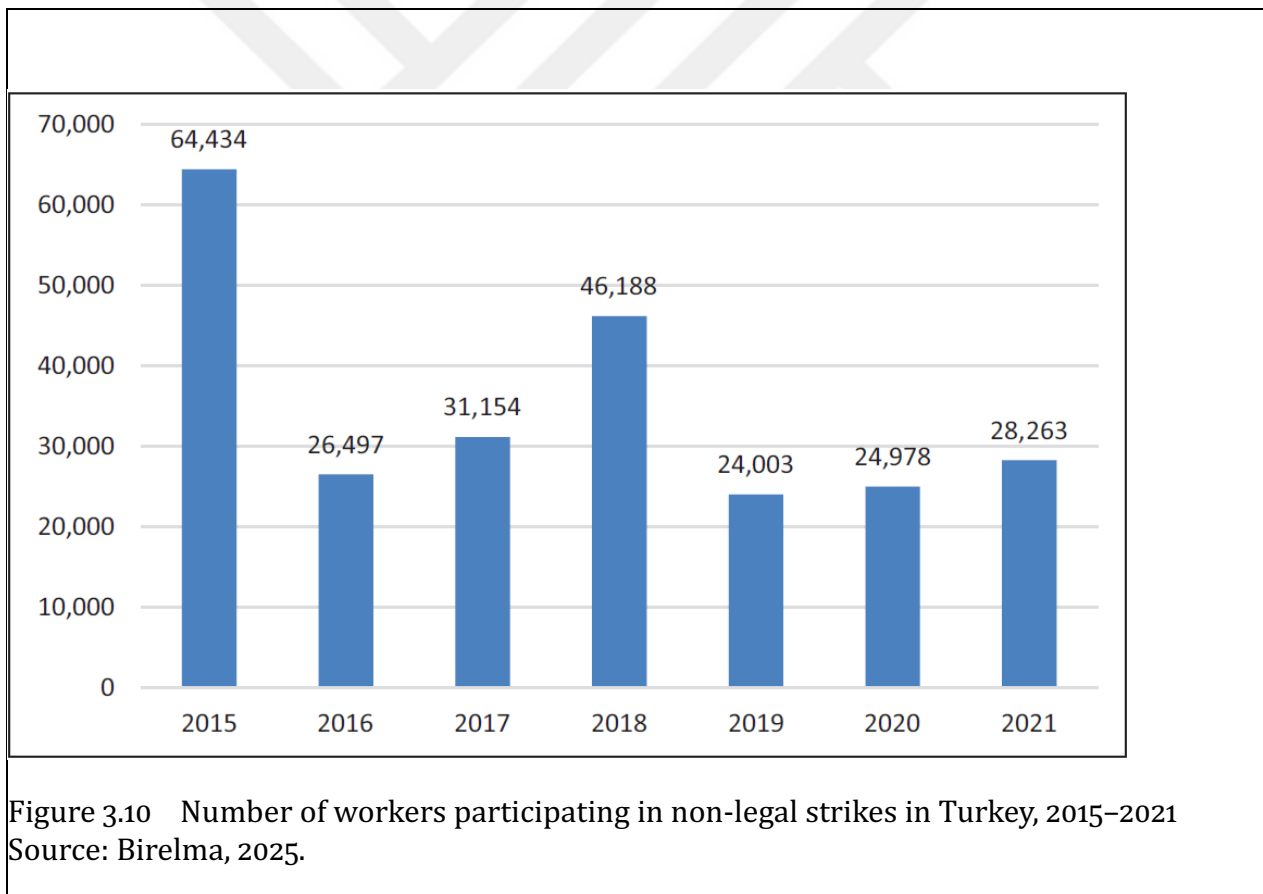
The 2015 wave of non-legal strikes was largely fueled by the self-organization of workers; estimates indicate that around 60% to 70% of the strikes and the resulting days lost were initiated independently by workers, without assistance from official unions. During that quarter of non-legal strikes, which accounted for two-thirds of the total days lost, workers also demonstrated against the formal union recognized at their workplace¹⁷⁴. The growing discontent among workers towards the unions, which tended to collaborate with employers at the expense of workers'

¹⁷³ Birelma, "Turkey's Rising Tide of Dissent: Charting the Wave of Non-Legal Strikes in the Mid-2010s."

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

rights, played a significant role in this movement's bottom-up character, similar to Metal Storm.

The wave of illegal strikes continued after 2015, albeit at a reduced rate, but as Birelma¹⁷⁵ claims, a considerable amount of non-legal strike actions in Turkey is obscured by the low figures of legal strikes. Figure 3.10 shows that between 2015 and 2021 number of non-legal strikers (245,000) was 14 times that of legal strikers (17,000). Frustration with the unions' pro-government and pro-boss stance, coupled with worsening working conditions, has led to a small number of union reactions that have taken the form of illegal strikes. This also indicates that labor organizing is beginning to take place in decentralized, non-union forms and to take on an independent and militant trend, as seen in the Chapter 2 for different countries.



¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

The TEKEL and Metal Storm mobilizations, though distinct in their sectoral and temporal contexts, together exemplify rare yet powerful moments of strategic reorientation and class opposition within Turkey's labor movement under AKP rule. Interpreted through Hyman's strategic orientation framework, both movements illustrate instances of rupture with the prevailing market- and society-oriented union practices and reflect a turn toward class-oriented, worker-led, grassroots activism. In both cases, workers bypassed union bureaucracies that had become complicit with employer, state or market agendas, instead asserting associative and communicative power through bottom-up coordination, wildcat strikes, and autonomous protest repertoires. These instances of worker-to-worker mobilization challenged the legitimacy of dominant unions such as TÜRK-İŞ and TÜRK METAL, as well as employer associations like MESS, leading to tangible shifts in power balances at the workplace and sectoral levels. The broader wave of non-legal strikes in 2015 further underscores this trend, revealing a growing disillusionment with formal union structures and a re-emergence of militant, decentralized labor agency. While these mobilizations remain largely confined to specific groups and have not coalesced into a nationwide labor resurgence, they represented crucial cracks in the edifice of neoliberal labor control and inspired the post-pandemic labor movement for reconstituting class-based resistance through alternative organizational forms.

In sum, the TEKEL and Metal Storm mobilizations marked a critical rupture in the long-standing trajectory of labor passivity under the AKP's authoritarian neoliberal regime. These episodes reactivated the class pole of labor resistance by mobilizing thousands of workers beyond the boundaries of traditional, bureaucratized union structures. They revealed not only the persistent potential of working-class agency but also the strategic value of direct action and grassroots organization in challenging both state repression and institutionalized yellow unionism. Although neither movement resulted in a sustained reversal of labor's structural decline, they served as powerful symbolic and organizational precedents for subsequent waves of decentralized, militant labor

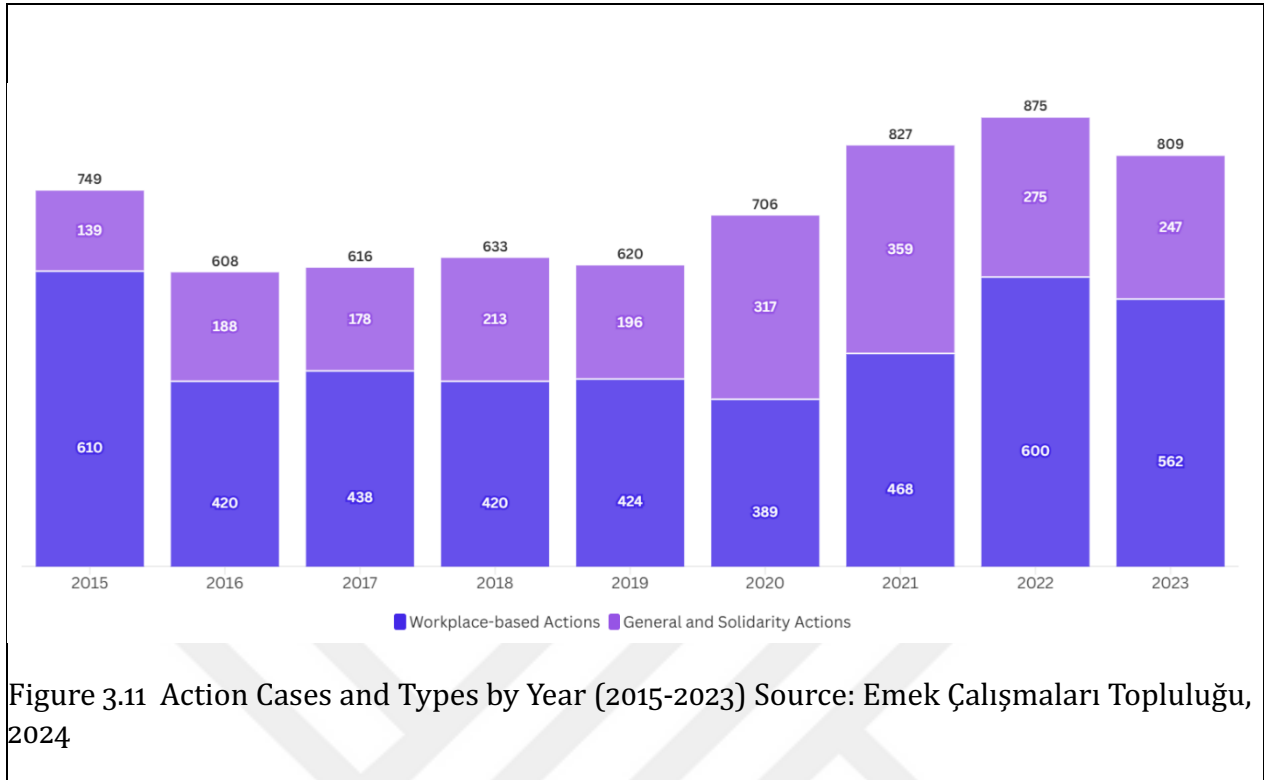
struggles. As we will see in the following section, the legacy of these mobilizations became an important reference point for the rise of independent unions and grassroots resistance in the 2020s.

§ 3.4 New Tendencies in the 2020s: Grassroots Resistance and the Rise of Independent Unions

In the previous section, we assessed the militant mobilizations of the working class that emerged as wildcat strikes during the AKP period up to 2020. These mobilizations diverged from traditional market and society-oriented unionism, highlighting a growing disillusionment with formal union structures and the emergence of decentralized labor agency. In this section, we will explore the revival of labor movements post-2020, which is inspired by the trends observed prior to 2020.

In spite of the ongoing difficulties encountered by the trade union movement, there has been a rise in overall labor actions since 2020. As illustrated in Figure 3.11, the significant number of demonstrations that took place due to the space for action established by the relatively democratic environment in the early part of 2015 was matched again in 2020-21. This increase indicates a notable mobilization, even though repression against trade unions and the working class has not eased. This revival encompasses considerable resistance across diverse sectors, with certain worker collectives achieving significant advancements. Deteriorating working conditions, soaring inflation, the AKP's electoral leniency, and the rise of militant labor movements are all factors contributing to this increase in activity¹⁷⁶.

¹⁷⁶ Birelma et al., "The Stubborn Persistence of Working-Class Protest in Turkey in an Age of Authoritarian Neoliberalism."



In addition to the quantitative increase, there has also been a qualitative transformation in the post-COVID period, as can be seen in the Soma miners' Ankara march and resistance in 2019-2020. Following the 2013 Soma mining disaster—which resulted in the deaths of 301 workers—approximately 3,500 miners who had survived the explosion or were later employed in various mining companies in Soma were gradually dismissed and left uncompensated. Over the course of six years, neither the legal efforts of the authorized union, Türkiye Maden-İş, nor the state's intervention yielded results. Instead, the union's proximity to the government and employers fostered a perception among workers that their claims were being deliberately stalled. In this context of frustration and political closure, a group of miners took the initiative to establish the Bağımsız Maden-İş (BMI, Independent Mineworkers' Union) in 2018, marking the beginning of an alternative labor organizing effort outside the established market-based and collaborationist structures.

From 2019 onward, the union engaged in grassroots organizing by visiting local neighborhoods and villages to mobilize the affected miners. In

July 2019, BMI organized its first public protest in Soma under the slogan “We spent a lifetime for a handful of coal, we endured injustice with patience, enough is enough!” The campaign escalated in October 2019, when the miners launched a long march to Ankara. Echoing the memory of the 1991 Zonguldak miners’ march, the action gained national attention. However, the march was halted by police at the entrance of the Kırkağaç district, where the miners began a 33-day sit-in at a pine grove, refusing to disperse¹⁷⁷.

During this period, BMI representatives engaged in negotiations with party leaders, government officials, and executives from Turkish Coal Enterprises (TKİ). The sit-in concluded in November 2019 after an official commitment was made to settle the miners’ compensation claims by January 2020. Although this concession marked a significant step, it did not include workers from certain privately operated (royalty-based) mines, whose compensation required legislative amendments. Despite promises from both ruling and opposition parties, no legal progress was made by early 2020. The miners planned renewed protests in March, but the COVID-19 pandemic delayed their actions. In July 2020, a law was passed, but it failed to address the full scope of grievances, excluding hundreds of miners.

As a result, BMI organized a second march to Ankara in October 2020. This time, the state’s response was more repressive: roads were blocked, miners were encircled by gendarmerie, and many were detained¹⁷⁸. The now-viral statement by a union official—“We are not afraid, commander”—captured the defiant spirit of the resistance. The miners were later released without charges. Subsequent negotiations resumed in Ankara, but were briefly interrupted by the Izmir earthquake. Demonstrating social solidarity beyond their own struggle, BMI-led miners joined rescue operations, further enhancing their public legitimacy. Upon resuming their march, they faced renewed repression but persisted until a

¹⁷⁷<https://bagimsizmaden.org/2019/10/10/olmek-var-donmek-yok/>

¹⁷⁸<https://bagimsizmaden.org/2020/10/17/aciklama-gozaltilar-derhal-serbest-birakilsin-madencilerin-talepleri-kabul-edilsin/>

final agreement was reached on November 17, 2020¹⁷⁹. Compensation payments began shortly thereafter.

Throughout this two-year resistance, local communities in Soma provided active support, while the strategic use of social media amplified the movement's visibility on a national scale. The struggle not only yielded concrete material gains—such as the belated payment of compensation—but also reshaped the landscape of labor activism in Turkey by offering an alternative model of organizing rooted in grassroots initiative, horizontalism, and political independence¹⁸⁰.

From the perspective of Hyman's¹⁸¹ strategic triangle, the Soma resistance exemplifies a class-oriented strategy, which signifies a qualitative shift from traditional unionism. It did not limit itself to narrow economic bargaining within a market logic, nor did it rely on traditional strategies. Instead, it confronted state repression, and articulated class-based demands in a public, politicized manner. The union's independent structure allowed it to bypass the constraints of state-sanctioned or collaborationist unions, enabling a more militant and responsive form of unionism aligned with the everyday experiences of the working class. In this sense, the Soma miners' resistance stands as a significant case of bottom-up, class-oriented, and decentralized labor struggle in Turkey's contemporary labor history.

In the years following the Soma miners' resistance, similar forms of labor unrest began to emerge across various sectors. In early 2022, Turkey witnessed a significant wave of wildcat strikes. On January 24, motorcycle couriers working for the e-commerce company Trendyol initiated a major work stoppage. Approximately one thousand freelance couriers halted their services for three days, securing notable concessions and setting off a broader wave of strikes. During January and February 2022 alone, a total of 107 wildcat strikes took place, involving around 25,000

¹⁷⁹ <https://bagimsizmaden.org/2020/11/17/bir-direnisi-daha-basari-ile-bitiren-maden-iscil-erinin-mucadelesine-selam-olsun/>

¹⁸⁰ 2022 Ocak-Şubat Grev Dalgası [January-February 2022 Strike Wave] (Emek Çalışmaları Topuluğu (Labor Studies Collective) and Evrensel, 2022).

¹⁸¹ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

workers. This means that one out of every thousand wage earners in Turkey participated in a strike during this period. Strikingly, 93% of these actions were centered on demands for improved conditions—primarily wage increases—and most lasted around three days. In over half of the cases, workers succeeded in gaining concessions¹⁸².

These strikes extended beyond couriers and included textile workers in Gaziantep, shipyard workers in Aliğa (İzmir), and metal and hosiery workers in Istanbul. Notably, the majority of these actions were led by non-unionized workers. Only 26 strikes were organized or supported by independent unions, 16 by Türk-İş affiliates, and 11 by DİSK unions. The involvement of independent militant unions in 26 cases is particularly significant. Despite their limited membership base, these unions—especially Umut-Sen—have gained considerable traction. They played leading roles in the widely publicized Trendyol and Migros warehouse strikes, utilizing militant tactics, securing public support, and ultimately achieving success. The newly founded Birtek-Sen in Gaziantep also had a positive impact on local labor actions¹⁸³. In contrast, it is worth noting the minimal contribution of traditional confederated unions to this wave of strikes. Since the 2015 “Metal Storm,” conventional unionism appears to have steadily declined in influence, increasingly giving way to the rise of independent and militant forms of unionism.

Grassroots workers and independent unions or decentralized worker organizations emerged prominently during the January-February surge of 2022. The strikes in January and February 2022 were not only lengthier but also considerably more aggressive than those that had occurred previously. This particular wave of strikes is both intriguing and distinct, primarily because it was unforeseen, especially in contrast to the striking patterns of earlier years. Accordingly, the more traditional, centralized, bureaucratic and confederative trade unionism was being replaced by a

¹⁸² 2022 Ocak-Şubat Grev Dalgası [January-February 2022 Strike Wave] (Emek Çalışmaları Topuluğu (Labor Studies Collective) and Evrensel, 2022).

¹⁸³ Birelma et al., “The Stubborn Persistence of Working-Class Protest in Turkey in an Age of Authoritarian Neoliberalism.”

more innovative, decentralized, bottom-up, militant and independent trade union movement.

The 2020s have witnessed the emergence of a qualitatively new labor dynamic in Turkey, characterized by grassroots mobilizations and the rise of independent, decentralized union structures that challenge the hegemony of traditional, bureaucratic unionism. The Soma miners' resistance and the 2022 wildcat strike wave exemplify a shift toward worker-initiated, class-oriented strategies that reject both state co-optation and institutional inertia. These developments signify a departure from conventional collective bargaining frameworks, foregrounding horizontal solidarity, public engagement, and political independence as core principles of contemporary labor organizing. As such, this period marks a potential turning point in the recomposition of Turkey's labor movement under conditions of deepening precarity and authoritarian constraint.

It was precisely in this conjuncture that the Private Sector Teachers' Union was formed: on the one hand, working people whose rights were being increasingly curtailed and living conditions worsened in the face of the authoritarian flexible labor regime of the authoritarian neoliberal government, and on the other hand, the class movement that began to abandon traditional means of struggle and to organize more independent, militant, bottom-up and worker-to-worker resistance. This context influenced all the characteristics of the Teachers' Union, from its founding to its forms of action. The next section will describe the sectoral conditions in which the Teachers' Union was founded and how the Teachers' Union was invented both as a result of and in response to these conditions.

Privatization of Education and the Formation and Strategies of PSTU

When the video of the teachers being detained popped up on my social media, I was initially very surprised. I looked into the details of the news to understand why dozens of teachers were being dragged on the ground and assaulted by the police before being forced into detention vehicles. That is where I first encountered PSTU unionized private sector teachers wanted to make a press statement on August 30, 2022 in front of the Ministry of National Education in Ankara to vocalize their demands for a base salary.

In Turkey, where freedom of expression and collective action has been severely restricted since post-2013 authoritarianism¹, such a press statement was not permitted. The police labeled the action "unlawful" and roughly detained the unionized teachers who refused to disperse despite warnings and showed their determination to continue their protest. This situation, frequently faced by unions in Turkey, rarely gets reflected in mainstream and traditional media outlets. News of such actions only gains traction among social media users who are sensitive to working-

¹ Esen and Gümüşçü, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey"; Esen and Gümüşçü, "Turkey: How the Coup Failed"; Kaygusuz, "Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Regime Security in Turkey: Moving to an 'Exceptional State' under AKP."

class issues. If an action makes a bit of noise, it might spread across social media more broadly. However, it is quite rare for news of these actions to reach mainstream national news agencies. Yet, this particular action by the teachers even found a place on the most pro-government news channels².

My decision to choose PSTU as a case study for this research stemmed from the union's militant activism before I began with my fieldwork. For anyone aiming to study contemporary strategies, tactics, and action repertoires of social movements, having an active union at hand is an invaluable asset. Immediately, I began following the union's social media accounts, as well as several personal accounts that shared union-related content. By monitoring the union's posts, I noted down the dates of upcoming actions and meetings, which then served as my initial point of access to the field.

My initial access to the field occurred in May 2024, when I joined a sit-in in front of the Istanbul Provincial Directorate of National Education to show solidarity. Around 5:00 PM, after their working hours, teachers would gather in a park near Sultanahmet Square, prepare their banners, placards, and sound systems, and begin the sit-in for four or five hours. When I arrived, about 15 teachers were sitting in their designated area, chatting while drinking tea and coffee. Some were dancing in a traditional halay, while others were speaking with representatives from other unions, political parties, and NGOs who had come to show support. I went to the area and sat down, greeting those present, but since I did not know anyone, I could not immediately strike up a conversation.

After sitting alone for a while, Furkan, a teacher, approached me; he had just finished a discussion with a group that had come to show solidarity. After we introduced ourselves, he asked me what school I taught at and what my subject was. I explained that I was not a teacher but a psychologist, and that I was there to offer my support. When I mentioned I was there in solidarity, I thought he seemed surprised for a moment, as I was not wearing any vest or other attire representing an organization.

² <https://www.sabah.com.tr/egitim/meb-ozel-sektor-ogretmenlerini-dinledi-6139147>

At least, I expected him to be surprised. However, he simply welcomed me. That evening, Furkan and I discussed the school where he worked, his organizing experiences there, the purpose of their sit-in, and what they hoped to achieve. I learned that they were there every evening, and on Friday evenings, volunteer lawyers would come to the sit-in area to provide legal counseling to teachers with legal problems. My experience on that first evening made me realize that the unionized teachers were aware of their problems, dedicated to their struggle, and very warm-hearted.

As PSTU operates in the same sector as my profession, there were no legal impediments for me to become a member. Consequently, I officially joined the union. In our subsequent conversations, I explained that despite not being a teacher, I had joined the union out of solidarity. They welcomed very positively and expressed their gratitude. It seems unlikely that PSTU will overcome the sector-wide threshold, which is a required membership rate to be able to be authorized in a workplace and sign a collective agreement. This is because the "Trade, Office, Education, and Fine Arts" sector (sector 10), in which it operates, is the largest of Turkey's 20 sectors³, employing 4,469,945 workers⁴. For this reason, I thought that my membership signifies nothing more than political solidarity. Nevertheless, being able to say that I am a union member and establish a connection with them was an important step for me. Furthermore, in our later discussions, I also identified myself as a member of an organization committed to supporting the working-class movement. I occasionally discussed the political stance of this organization with the teachers during my field interviews. This information about myself

³ The trade union landscape in Turkey consists of two parts: civil servant unions and worker unions. Civil servant unions cover only permanent employees in the public sector, while worker unions cover a wide range of employees, from contract employees in public institutions to private sector workers. The education unions of civil servants are large and robust, such as Eğitim-Bir-Sen, Eğitim-Sen, and Eğitim-İş. Yet, since there is no education sector among the worker unions? in the private sector, PSTU is in sector 10 (meaning what? What else is in sector 10?), which led it to be relatively weak. SON CÜMLEYİ BİR KEZ DAHA GÖZDEN GEÇİR LÜTFEN.

⁴ General Directorate of Labor, 2025.

somewhat altered their perception of me. It became clear that I was not just any individual showing solidarity; for me, this solidarity had an ethical-political dimension. Moreover, as our conversations with the teachers progressed, it also became apparent that I was familiar with union terminology, knew about socialist trade union traditions, and that we shared common ground in terms of this linguistic usage. Finally, and most importantly, starting from my second field visit, I informed them that I was conducting research for my Master's thesis. All of this led to subtle changes in the expressions they used when speaking with me. My identity as an anti-capitalist union member and my familiarity with socialist trade union jargon created an impression that I "already knew" certain things, prompting them to use shortcuts when explaining political tensions or tactical discussions within the union.

This is how I began my fieldwork. As time went by and we got to know each other better, the teachers' perspectives on me, and my perspectives on teachers, changed in various ways. In addition to making great friendships, I also had the opportunity to experience how struggle transforms individuals. Frankly, it would not be entirely accurate to say that I personally remained the same throughout this struggle. I experienced a great deal about labor relations in Turkey, union struggles, the nature of bargaining with state bureaucracy, and the generally empowering effect of social solidarity. I learned, and as I learned, I changed too.

As I clarified in the Methodology section, the dual role—as both a participant in the union and a researcher—inevitably shaped my fieldwork. My solidarity membership facilitated access to insider discussions, while my familiarity with union terminology and traditions created a sense of shared ground with teachers. At the same time, it required constant reflexivity: the perception that I 'already knew' certain dynamics both opened doors and risked narrowing the range of explanations offered to me. Throughout this chapter, I remain attentive to how this positionality informed the data I collected and the interpretations I draw.

Building on this foundation, the chapter is guided by two interrelated research questions: What is the relationship between the Private Sector Teachers' Union's struggle strategies and the sectoral conditions of the

private education sector? And conversely, how do these sectoral conditions shape, constrain, and enable the union's repertoire of struggle? These questions provide the analytical thread that ties together the empirical material and the theoretical frameworks.

To address these questions, the analysis draws on two complementary frameworks. Hyman's⁵ strategic triangle offers a lens for situating PSTU's approach at the class pole—marked by uncompromising confrontation with employers—where unions politicize workplace issues. This framework allows me to assess whether PSTU's repertoire reflects a primarily class-based militancy or whether its tactics also extend toward building legitimacy and alliances beyond the workplace. At the same time, Eric Blanc's⁶ account of the worker-to-worker model provides a way to interpret how PSTU achieved rapid growth despite structural barriers that make collective bargaining impossible in its sector. This perspective highlights the grassroots mechanics of the union's expansion, from peer-to-peer mentoring to the diffusion of tactics across workplaces. Taken together, these frameworks illuminate both the strategic orientation and the organizational dynamics of PSTU, allowing me to capture not only what the union fights for, but also how it sustains and scales its struggle under repressive conditions.

Therefore, the chapter proceeds in three steps. First, it situates the formation of PSTU within the broader trajectory of educational privatization in Turkey, tracing how neoliberal reforms reshaped the sector and laid the structural groundwork for teachers' precarity. Second, it turns to the working conditions of private sector teachers, highlighting how legal ambiguity, low wages, and insecurity created the immediate terrain of struggle. Finally, it examines the establishment of the union and its methods of struggle, analyzing them as responses to these sectoral conditions.

My core argument is that there is a direct and mutual relationship between the conditions of the private education sector and the union's strategies. This interrelationship demonstrates how the unequal and

⁵ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

⁶ Blanc, *We Are the Union: How Worker-to-Worker Organizing Is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big*.

repressive features of the sector and the union's tactical responses continuously shape one another. The fact that PSTU—operating in a sector where collective bargaining is structurally foreclosed—resorted to alternative means of struggle from the outset is illustrative of this dynamic. At the same time, the daily problems faced by teachers compelled the union to devise innovative tactics, often by groping in the dark.

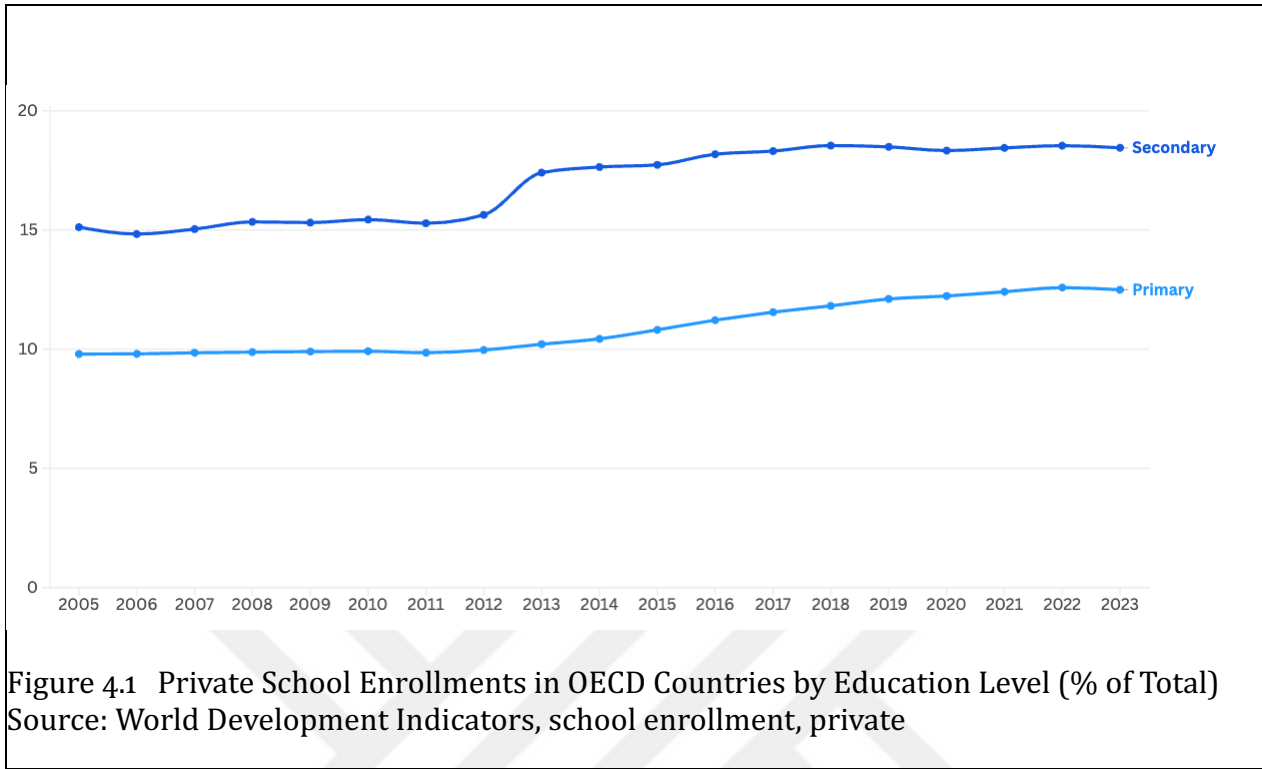
§ 4.1 Privatization of Education and Sectoral Conditions of Private Education

To understand the formation of the PSTU, it is first necessary to consider how the private education sector in Turkey has developed. This section will explain briefly the historical development of private education, followed by a discussion of the working conditions of teachers in the private sector.

Since the 1970s, globally, privatization of education has been supported through the arguments that the state should withdraw from the provision, funding, and regulation of education to enhance its efficiency, competitiveness, equity, and effectiveness⁷. Accordingly, the competition would foster innovation in public schools, expand equal opportunities for disadvantaged students, empower families with school choice, and democratize educational spaces. In this regard, the private sector has begun to play an increasingly important role in the provision of education services globally⁸.

⁷ H. Yolcu, "Eğitimde Özelleştirme: Strateji, Yöntem ve Teknikler," *Ankara University Journal of Faculty of Educational Sciences (JFES)* 54, no. 2 (2021): 645–75; Helga Cuéllar-Marchelli, "Decentralization and Privatization of Education in El Salvador: Assessing the Experience," *International Journal of Educational Development* 23 (March 2003): 145–66.

⁸ Yolcu, "Eğitimde Özelleştirme: Strateji, Yöntem ve Teknikler"; H. Yolcu, "Education Agenda of Turkey: Marketing within Context of Neo-Liberal Policies," in *Neo-Liberal Educational Reforms: A Critical Analysis*, ed. D. Turner and H. Yolcu (New York: Routledge, 2014), 50–72; G.A. Toker, "Eğitimde özelleştirme," in *Eğitim ekonomisi ve planlaması*, ss. 175–215, ed. M.Sağır R. Yirci (Ankara: Pegem Akademi, 2020); A. Carrasco and H.M. Gunter, "The 'Private' in the Privatisation of Schools: The Case of Chile," *Educational Review* 71,



Educational privatization is an umbrella term encompassing various policy initiatives that involve transferring responsibilities traditionally held by the state to the private sector⁹. Common forms include allowing private actors to provide or participate in public education¹⁰. In essence, privatization refers to the integration of private providers into education delivery through specific policies, strategies, and mechanisms as

no. 1 (2019): 67–80; A. Verger et al., *The Privatization of Education: A Political Economy and Global Education Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); N. Kurul et al., “Kapitalist sistemde öğrenme ve pazar ilişkisi: Metalaştırma, ölçme,” in *Kamusal eğitim: eleştirel yazılar*, trans. N. Kurul and T.Öztürk İ. Metinnam (Ankara: Siyasal Kitabevi, 2013), 57–92; K. Mok and J. Tan, *Globalization and Marketization in Education: A Comparative Analysis of Hong Kong and Singapore* (Cornwall: MPG Books Ltd, 2004); J.S. Ball and D. Youdel, *Hidden privatization in public education* (London: University of London, 2008).

⁹ Clive R. Belfield and Henry M. Levin, *Education Privatization: Causes, Consequences and Planning Implications* (Paris: UNESCO, 2002).

¹⁰ Toker, “Eğitimde özelleştirme.”

alternatives to public provision¹¹. For example, according to Belfield and Levin¹², privatization in education operates through three key strategies: increasing the number of private schools, raising the financial contribution of users (families and students), and regulating public schools through mechanisms such as parental involvement, school choice, transparency, and accountability. For example, subcontracting for delivering support and infrastructure services in education has increased since Turkey signed the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) in 1995, a WTO treaty aimed at privatizing all public services, originally adopted in 1994 by 143 countries¹³.

Another reflection of privatization policies in education is private schooling. Over time, the number of private educational institutions and those receiving education through private enterprises, rather than through public services, has increased. The teachers whose unionization processes are discussed in this study are employed in private schools, whose numbers have increased during this privatization process, or in training centers, such as private teaching institutions, designed to prepare for university or high school placement exams. These teachers' working conditions have undergone radical changes with the rise of private schooling. Therefore, this trend of private schooling requires scrutiny.

4.1.1 *Private Schooling in Turkey*

Following the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the education system was centralized through the 1924 Law on the Unification of Education (Tevhid-i Tedrisat), bringing all schools—including foreign and minority institutions—under state control. At that time, Turkish private schools were scarce, prompting state-supported initiatives to expand their number. The 1961 Constitution provided legal guarantees for

¹¹ Yolcu, "Eğitimde Özelleştirme: Strateji, Yöntem ve Teknikler."

¹² Belfield and Levin, *Education Privatization: Causes, Consequences and Planning Implications*.

¹³ Yolcu, "Eğitimde Özelleştirme: Strateji, Yöntem ve Teknikler."

the establishment of private schools, facilitating their growth¹⁴. From the 1980s onward, the expansion of private schools accelerated significantly, driven by both neoliberal reforms and the sector's profitability, alongside continued state incentives¹⁵.

Various legal regulations implemented in the 1980s - for example, granting freedom to private educational institutions in determining student fees - institutionalized sectoral competition. Following these legal regulations, there was a significant increase in the number of private schools. The number of private primary schools, which was 90 in 1980, increased to 155 in 1990, and the number of private secondary schools increased from 77 to 171. In the same year, there were a total of 154 private high schools¹⁶.

The increasing number of private schools necessitated new legal regulations. Private Education Law No. 5580 was passed in 2007. This law redefined the conditions for opening private schools, their personnel, transfer, financial support, management, supervision, and oversight, as well as their educational activities. In 2012, Turkey restructured its education system by extending compulsory schooling from eight to twelve years through the 4+4+4 model, which divided education into primary, middle, and high school stages. This reform was framed as a modernization effort aimed at aligning with international standards, increasing flexibility through earlier vocational and religious pathways, and raising enrollment rates, particularly among girls¹⁷. The introduction of the 12-year compulsory education is closely linked to the neoliberal restructuring of education in Turkey, particularly the acceleration of privatization. The reform, enacted through Law No. 6287, not only restructured compulsory education into distinct stages but also facilitated the expansion of private

¹⁴ E.A. Aslan, "Türkiye'de özel okullaşma," *Bitlis Eren Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 8, no. 1 (2019): 263-76.

¹⁵ Yolcu, "Eğitimde Özelleştirme: Strateji, Yöntem ve Teknikler"; Aslan, "Türkiye'de özel okullaşma."

¹⁶ Aslan, "Türkiye'de özel okullaşma."

¹⁷ B. Kasa and Y. Ersoz, "Pros and Cons: Compulsory 12 Year Education Reform in Turkey," *South African Journal of Education* 36, no. 2 (2016): 1-10.

schooling by enabling earlier tracking into different school types, including vocational and religious institutions. Following its implementation, the number of private schools and student enrollments doubled, while significant amounts of public funding were redirected to private schools through per-student subsidies. In this sense, the 4+4+4 system functioned as a mechanism for the marketization of education, aligning with broader neoliberal policies that redefined education from a universal right into a commodified service accessible primarily to wealthier families¹⁸.

Furthermore, the legal process regarding the closure of private teaching institutions which trains students for university exams or their conversion into private schools began in 2014, leading to a further increase in the number of private schools.

As shown in Figure 4.2, the number of private schools increased at all levels of education between 2007 and 2018. The largest increase occurred in the secondary school level, which includes private high schools and middle schools, rising from 18.6% in the 2007-2008 academic year to 45.6% in the 2017-2018 academic year, followed by pre-school education, which rose from 6.4% to 20.1%. The lowest rate of increase in private school enrollment was in primary schools, rising from 2.5% to 5.3%.

As of 2023-2024 education year, the rate of private preschools in total preschools is 21%, the rate of private primary schools in total primary schools is 8.3% and the rate of secondary schools is 17.4 (lower secondary 11%, high school 25.3%). Besides, there are 15,933 private schools in Turkey in total, with 1,631,192 students attending these schools¹⁹.

¹⁸ A. Bayram, "The Reflection of Neoliberal Economic Policies on Education: Privatization of Education in Turkey," *European Journal of Educational Research* 7, no. 2 (2018): 341–47.

¹⁹ *MEB İstatistikleri: Örgün Eğitim 2023-2024* [Ministry of Education Statistics: Formal Education 2023-2024] (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [Ministry of National Education], n.d.), accessed September 21, 2025.

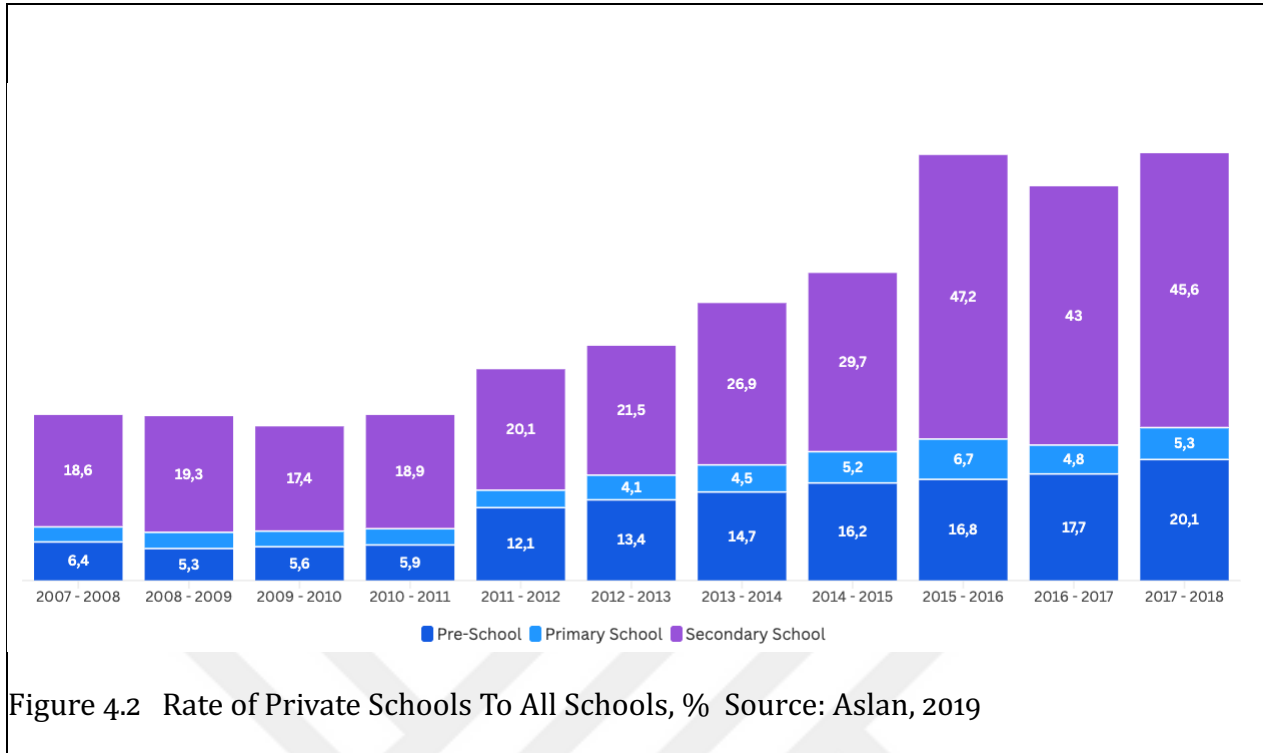


Figure 4.2 Rate of Private Schools To All Schools, % Source: Aslan, 2019

With the rise in the number of private schools, the number of families sending their children to these schools has also increased. At the same time, user fees have significantly increased household spending on education. Between 2011 and 2018, education expenditures by Turkish families rose by 68%, reaching 43 billion TL in 2018²⁰. As shown in Figure 4.3, as private schools opened, the number of students increased, following a similar trend. Since 2014, the education support fee provided by the MEB to families enrolling their children in private schools has steered them towards private schools²¹.

As of 2023-2024 education year, the rate of private preschool students to all preschool students is 18%, the rate of private primary school students to all primary school students is 6.2%, and the rate of private

²⁰ Yolcu, "Eğitimde Özelleştirme: Strateji, Yöntem ve Teknikler."

²¹ Aslan, "Türkiye'de özel okullaşma."

students of secondary schools is 8.3% (lower secondary 6.9%, high schools 9.7%).²²

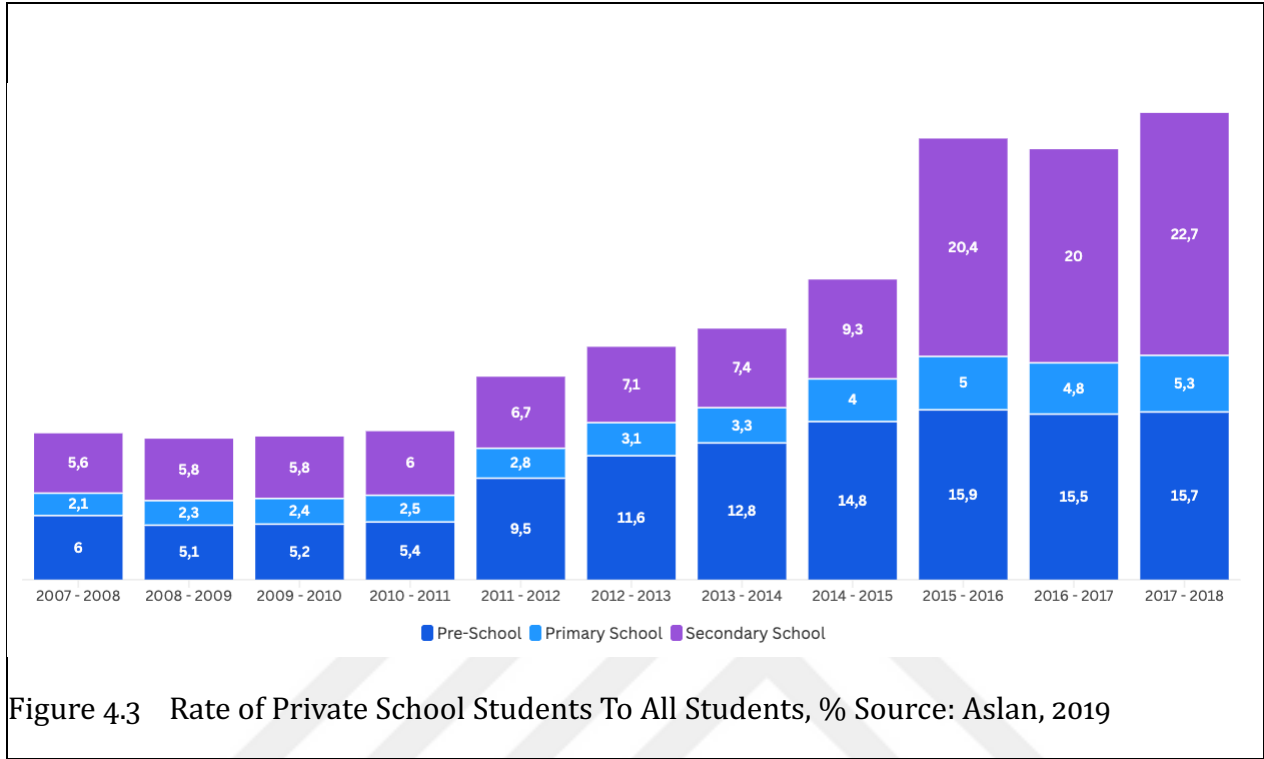


Figure 4.3 Rate of Private School Students To All Students, % Source: Aslan, 2019

Lastly, the total number of teachers working in private schools is 178,848 (31,402 in preschools, 38,778 in primary schools, and 108,668 in secondary schools).

The teaching profession has undergone a significant transformation during this period of the increase of private schooling. Private schools' profit-maximizing business logic has led to a shift in their positions from those in the public sector²³.

Finally, all of these private schools and training centers operated in sector 10, which is quite broad and loosely defined in Turkey, had the largest number of workers, with 4,469,945 workers. According to union law

²² MEB İstatistikleri: Örgün Eğitim 2023-2024 [Ministry of Education Statistics: Formal Education 2023-2024].

²³ G. Cerev and S. Çoşkun, "Özel Okul Öğretmenlerinin Çalışma Sorunları Üzerine Nitel Bir Araştırma: Elazığ İli Örneği," *Fırat Üniversitesi Harput Araştırmaları Dergisi* 7, no. 13 (2020): 125-42.

no. 6356, a union should organize at least 1% of the workers in that sector to obtain authorization which makes for sector 10 nearly 44,000 workers. In this context, sector 10 is one of the most challenging and broadly encompassing “umbrella” sectors to organize.

4.1.2 *Private Sector Teachers*

The working conditions of private sector teachers present a series of problems that have been exacerbated by the marketization of education in Türkiye. During this process, the foundations of the teaching profession, such as legal status, economic rights, and professional security, have been eroded, and private sector teachers have entered a period of proletarianization and precariousness. This section will examine how teachers grapple with issues such as high precarity, low wages, and long working hours under legal ambiguity.

According to Law No. 1739 on the Basic Law of National Education, which is the law that regulates all educational activities in Turkey, teaching is defined as a specialized profession responsible for the delivery and management of education. The law makes no distinction between public and private school teachers, thus also encompassing teachers working in the private sector. In accordance with this law, teachers working in private schools are appointed by the Ministry of National Education, meaning that teachers continue to be employees of the Ministry of National Education (MEB) as well as the private school. However, not everything about the working conditions of these teachers is regulated by this law. Some of their personal rights are regulated by the general labor law. As a result, the working conditions of private school teachers are regulated by multiple legal frameworks, including Laws No. 1739 (Basic Law of National Education), 657 (Civil Servants Law), 5580 (Private Education Law), 7528 (Teaching Profession Law), and 4857 (Labor Law). The overlapping nature of these regulations often causes legal ambiguity, leaving many teachers unaware of their employment status or rights. Fikret, a teacher working in a private school, complained about the lack of respect and not

being treated as teachers at private educational institutions, despite the fact that they are officially appointed by MEB:

“We’re technically appointed under the MEB. The schools we work at are also under the Ministry. There are certain criteria we have to meet to be appointed as teachers there — so in practice, we’re MEB personnel, because we are teachers. But when you look at the conditions, we’re not treated like teachers at all. In Turkey, teachers are held in incredibly high regard by society — because everyone has some kind of connection to school and being a student, and the central figure in that is the teacher. But in private institutions, that respect is completely gone.”

The legal ambiguity created by the multitude of laws regulating the working conditions and rights of private sector teachers in Turkey is being exploited by employers²⁴. The lengthy nature of labor lawsuits also facilitates this exploitation, leaving teachers seeking their rights without any results for years.

Besides the legal ambiguity, the rights and working conditions of private sector teachers were regressed by legal changes made in 2014. For example, provisions within the former Private Education Institutions Law that equalized the salaries of private sector and public sector teachers, mandated increased payments for delayed payments, limited the number of weekly teaching hours, and restricted the number of hourly teachers²⁵ employed at an institution, were all repealed. The removal of these regulations, which protected the rights of private sector teachers regarding wages and working conditions, made the private education

²⁴ In this study, employers refer to the capital owners of private schools. These capital owners can be either individuals or legal entities. The principal is a highly paid administrator working at the school. Because these administrators are often former teachers, they understand the needs of teachers. However they often align their own interests with those of employers. In this sense, they act as intermediaries between employers and teachers.

²⁵ The teachers who are not permanent staff and are paid per lesson hour. According to data released by Türk Eğitim-Sen, a total (at private and public schools) of 86,136 paid teachers have worked in 78 provinces in the 2024-2025 academic year.

sector more vulnerable to profit maximization, paving the way for an increase in the number of these institutions²⁶.

Thus, private sector teachers' wages were left entirely to market conditions, falling to the minimum wage level. Many newly graduated teachers were even forced to work informally, earning less than the minimum wage. The wage balance within the sector was so disrupted that teachers who had previously resigned from their public sector jobs for the private sector returned to the public sector due to the sudden drop in their wages. Previously, they were paid at least as much as public sector teachers and worked at most the same hours. However, after the 2014 regulations, they were working at least as much as public sector teachers and, mostly at best, were paid the same as public sector teachers.

These legal changes not only increased working hours on official days, but also deregulated the sector, leading to informal work patterns and unpaid overtime. Forced work during holidays and forced teachers to perform tasks outside of teaching became common as a result of this deregulation.

Private school teachers are employed under fixed-term contracts under Law No. 5580. A fixed-term employment contract is a type of employment contract in which the employee is paid a wage in exchange for performing a specific task for a specific period of time. The contract automatically terminates upon the expiration of the specified period. In this case, the employee is not entitled to severance pay or notice pay, as there is no termination. However, severance pay is payable in cases of wrongful termination by the employer or justified termination by the employee. The possibility of gaining the right to reinstatement through litigation in case of an employer's unjust termination of a fixed-term employment contract was eliminated by a Supreme Court precedent in 2018²⁷. In its 2018 unification of jurisprudence, the Supreme Court ruled that contracts concluded under the Law No. 5580 are to be regarded as

²⁶ G. Cantürk, "Özel Öğretim Kurumlarında Görev Yapan Öğretmenlerin ve Devlet Okullarındaki Ücretli Öğretmenlerin Karşılaştıkları Sorunlarla İlgili Görüşleri: Twitter Analizi," *Eğitim Ve Yeni Yaklaşımlar Dergisi* 6, no. 1 (2023): 128–49.

²⁷ Ibid.

fixed-term contracts in all circumstances. The Court reasoned that the legislator's intention was to guarantee the continuity of education by ensuring that employment relationships would be tied to the academic year. Therefore, such contracts cannot be considered "minimum-term" agreements that would later transform into indefinite contracts. As a result, however, the annual renewal of these contracts does not convert them into indefinite contracts, and teachers are excluded from job security provisions such as reinstatement and severance or notice compensation upon the expiry of the term. The only exception is that, if the employer terminates the contract prematurely without any just cause, teachers may claim compensation for the remainder of the contract period, as well as severance pay where the conditions are met.

Therefore, these fixed-term contracts are the main reason why teachers have no job security. These contracts, which expire every year and are re-signed according to the employer's offer, allow the employer to dismiss any employee they wish. In other words, teachers who are deemed to be underperforming or who stand out during the academic year can be easily dismissed every summer under this type of contract. This situation not only strips teachers of their right to object but also forces them into a state of self-censorship, compelling them to comply with the employer's demands and remain silent in the face of injustice.

Fixed-term contracts allow employers to employ teachers for any length of time they choose. For example, despite the legal requirement of a teacher signing a fixed-term contract for at least 12 months, many schools and training centers offer teachers contracts for 10 months. This prevents teachers, who are legally entitled to paid summer vacations, from receiving payment during their summer break. However, because 10-month contracts are illegal and schools must submit a contract to the MEB for official teacher appointments, a fraudulent practice known as a "drawer contract" is employed. Under this scheme, teachers sign two contracts: one for 10 months and the other for 12 months. The 12-month contract is sent to the Ministry of National Education, and the teacher is appointed based on this contract. However, the teacher is unaware of this contract and is given a copy of the 10-month contract. At the end of the

10th month, teachers are required to sign a resignation letter, effectively declaring that they have officially waived their rights under the 12-month contract. The legal ambiguity mentioned above and the fact that teachers are unaware that they can get legal support have enabled this fraud to become widespread in the sector.

Teacher Dilek expressed the prevalence of this 10-month contract practice in the sector as follows:

"For us, the school year runs about ten months. You start teaching around August, and in June, the kids take their exams. Then the employer calls you in and says, 'Teacher, I need you to sign a document.' You sign it because they tell you, 'You have to.' I only found out much later that what they were having us sign was actually a resignation letter. Normally, I'd be entitled to my salary through the end of August. But before we had the union, all of our friends were signing that thing without a second thought."

In Turkey, the widespread use of fixed-term contracts and the availability of a large reserve of young teacher candidates weaken teachers' positions in wage negotiations and increase turnover rates. These contracts result in annual staffing changes, allowing schools to keep employment costs low. This situation can lead to arbitrary dismissals of teachers who unionize or advocate for their rights, ultimately impacting the stability of the educational environment.

The large pool of young and unemployed teachers is primarily due to the limited number of publicly employed positions and the intense competition for those jobs. As a result, newly graduated teacher candidates often spend a long time searching for employment in public institutions, turn to private educational institutions, or choose to leave the teaching profession altogether²⁸. Another contributing factor is the failure to regulate the enrollment numbers in education faculties according to the

²⁸ Ibid.; Ferit Kılıçkaya and Jaroslaw Krajka, "A Review of Language Teacher Selection Examination and Recruitment in Turkey and Poland," *International Journal of Research Studies in Language Learning* 2 (March 2013).

actual teacher needs of the country²⁹. Tragically, several unassigned teachers have contemplated suicide; since 2006, more than 40 have taken their lives³⁰.

In sum, teachers working in private schools lack job security, work for low wages and undefined working hours, conduct one-on-one or group studies in addition to the classes they teach, and perform unpaid chores such as preparing and solving questions outside of work hours³¹.

Cerev and Coşkun³², in their study on the working conditions of private school teachers, found that the core issue stems from private schools operating as profit-driven businesses, unlike public institutions. This market-oriented logic reshapes school management, teacher, parent, and student relations into customer-provider dynamics. As a result, teachers face precarious employment, low wages, and diminished professional recognition. They are viewed less as educators and more as replaceable employees by both school administrations and families.

All these conditions have transformed private sector teachers from a respected and highly profitable professional group into a proletarianized, precarious, and one of the working classes with the least bargaining power. The next section will explore the responses to this professional erosion, focusing on the Private Sector Teachers' Union, established in 2021.

²⁹ Ramazan Basturk, "Kamu Personeli Seçme Sinavına Hazırlanan Öğretmen Adaylarının Sınav Kaygı Düzeylerinin İncelenmesi.," *Firat Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 17 (January 2007): 163–76.

³⁰ Cantürk, "Özel Öğretim Kurumlarında Görev Yapan Öğretmenlerin ve Devlet Okullarındaki Ücretli Öğretmenlerin Karşılaştıkları Sorunlarla İlgili Görüşleri: Twitter Analizi."

³¹ İbid.; Z. Kiraz and N. Kurul, "Türkiye'de öğretmen işsizliği ve ataması yapılmayan öğretmenler hareketi," *Mersin Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi* 14, no. 1 (2018): 270–302.

³² Cerev and Coşkun, "Özel Okul Öğretmenlerinin Çalışma Sorunları Üzerine Nitel Bir Araştırma: Elazığ İli Örneği."

§ 4.2 Responses and Strategies of Teachers

“So, when it was raise time, I still hadn’t heard a thing from the union. I said to my friends, “Look, this isn’t working — we can’t keep working these long hours for this kind of pay. Let’s just go talk to them.” It was super spontaneous. But wow, the reaction we got was harsh — they literally kicked us out of the room. I still remember... I actually cried while I was talking. ... And it went on like that for three whole days. Then the parents started calling, like, “What’s going on? Why aren’t there any classes?” So, we told them, “We’ve decided not to teach, and we’re counting on your support.” And after that, the parents started showing up at the school — calls, visits, back and forth. They really stood behind us.”
(Ecre)

Problems such as low wages, low raises, long working hours, forced labor, mandatory weekend work, and lack of overtime pay had fed up with Ecre and her colleagues working at a campus of MDC Schools in Istanbul, in early 2022. Quite spontaneously, Ecre started talking to her teacher friends right after hearing about the raise. Many stood behind it, some abstained. To her, she had no trouble convincing people, as she was a popular character and had met many teachers. First, they went to the school principal to discuss the raise, and there were 30 of them. In response to the principal’s harsh reaction, Ecre, once again acting on the spur of the moment, said, “Then we won’t be attending classes either.” She had to convince her abstaining friends of this, but they succeeded. For the next three days, no classes were held at any of the kindergarten, primary, secondary, and high school levels on that campus belonging to MDC Schools. Teachers entered the classrooms to avoid any security breaches, but they gave the students blank sheets of paper and told them to engage in free activities. By keeping the classroom door open, they signaled to the administration that the lesson was not being taught. This situation quickly caught the attention of parents, and the school administration faced backlash. Parents were shocked to learn about the working conditions of teachers at schools where they paid exorbitant fees, and they pressured the administration for causing this problem, which ultimately disrupted

students' education. Unable to withstand the pressure, the school administration gave teachers a 65% raise instead of the first proposal of 10%.

Such resistance in private educational institutions has become particularly frequent after the pandemic. However, few have been successful. Perhaps one of the most significant of these was the MDC Schools resistance, in which Ecre was a part. According to Ecre, the strength of their resistance was due to the strong friendships and trust among the teachers, the close age groups, and the fact that Ecre, one of the key figures in organizing the struggle from beginning to end, was a well-known and popular teacher at school. In Ecre's words:

"But I think what really made that resistance grow so much was how strong our friendships were with each other. Like, for example, I got along really well with my own group, and we were all around the same age. The retired teachers there really liked me, too. Honestly, I was a pretty well-liked person at the school."

Ecre's popularity as a teacher demonstrated her organic leadership. Yet, two points should be noted; first, Ecre was not the only one who strives for an action despite her narrative, and second, although in the beginning they wanted to keep their action until their demands are accepted, after three days, some teachers dropped the action and started the lessons properly.

Ecre and her friends who strived for an action were not just organic leaders; they were the 'militant minority' in the workplace³³. Ecre had been a member of a socialist party's youth organization since her youth, possessed a class struggle orientation, and had the courage to act independently. A small number of teachers, her closest circle in action, was too coming from some leftist traditions or had that awareness. As Blanc³⁴ demonstrated, the presence of such a militant minority in the workplace contributed significantly to igniting of resistance processes and the

³³ Blanc, *Red State Revolt: The Teachers' Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics.*, 83; Birelma, "Militant Minority at Work: A Successful Case of Unionisation of Garment Workers in Istanbul."

³⁴ Blanc, *Red State Revolt: The Teachers' Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics.*

organization of teachers. Without Ecre's initiatives that ignited the fuse, the resistance in MDC Schools would have been unthinkable.

As a result of the struggle at MDC Schools, the teachers achieved their demands. The mass layoffs during resistance processes at other schools during that period did not occur here, as the teachers threatened the administration with "even one dismissal, and we will all resign," leaving them without teachers in the middle of the academic year. The threat further strengthened the solidarity among the teachers. As a tangible result of this solidarity, 25 to 30 teachers at MDC Schools later joined the union. Ecre, in particular, assumed essential roles within the union. Along with Ecre, many other MDC teachers assumed various roles and responsibilities during the union's early years.

However, the union could not influence the resistance process at MDC Schools because it was newly established and not sufficiently organized. When the resistance at the MDC was covered by some national press outlets with high worker sensitivity, the founding team of the union, which had been established a few months earlier that year, wanted to contact the MDC teachers to support the resistance. Yet, because the school administration was trying to find out who had commissioned these reports, the teachers thought their union colleagues were the school administration's agents. Therefore, the relationship between the union and the teachers of MDC Schools improved after the resistance ended. Regardless, the union's approach of spontaneously engaging in resistance and attempting to win over the teachers there, especially the organic leaders, is a crucial worker-to-worker organization tactic discussed by Blanc³⁵.

The resistance at the MDC was both typical and a more advanced example of the reactions of teachers, overwhelmed by precarious conditions and driven to the brink of extinction, exhibited at their workplaces. It was typical because it had become a common practice for teachers to organize themselves and agree on a reaction when they received news of a low raise or when their vacation rights were usurped. It was advanced

³⁵ Blanc, *We Are the Union: How Worker-to-Worker Organizing Is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big*, 181.

because, while the agreed-upon form of reaction often manifested in more naive ways, such as leaving a pen at the principal's door or wearing black, at the MDC, the teachers expressed their reactions by walking off the job. As a form of militant activism, the walkout at the MDC was highly effective, striking, and successful. It attracted attention, pressured the administration through parents, and thus achieved their demands. This spontaneous reaction of the teachers, as will be seen below, became an institutionalized strategy within the union: attracting public attention, pressuring the administration (with public support), and achieving their demands.

Teachers reacted to the deepening precarious conditions following the pandemic with spontaneous examples of resistance, as in the MDC schools. But teachers' reactions were not limited to spontaneous ones. First and foremost, before the MDC process, a group of teachers from across Turkey founded the Private Sector Teachers' Union in 2021 and began organizing a range of efforts: First, (i) while developing new forms of struggle under its umbrella, the union also embraced these spontaneous reactions, striving to become a haven for all private sector teachers facing injustice. From the very beginning of the union's founding and throughout its campaigns, (ii) social media activism was also utilized as a means of organizing, raising awareness, gaining visibility, and exposing institutions where rights were being violated. Meetings like (iii) legal support days to raise awareness of teachers about their rights. Because private educational institutions are under the supervision of the MEB, private sector teachers who experienced rights violations frequently used the MEB's (iv) complaint and inspection mechanisms. When official complaint mechanisms proved inadequate, the union conducted (v) raids on private educational institutions, issued (vi) demonstrations when access to schools was impossible or as general actions, and implemented various action methods to address various structural problems in the private education sector, including (vii) holding sit-ins in front of parliament and ministries, and engaging in (viii) diplomatic activities with members of parliament and bureaucrats. The following sections will explain each of

these methods, thereby attempting to highlight the union's overall strategy.

4.2.1 *Founding of the Union and Unionization Process*

Private sector teachers' first response to the deepening precariousness in their sector was the establishment of the Private Sector Teachers' Union in August 2021. A group of teachers, who met each other on social media, through groups of friends, and through colleagues at their workplaces, formed a solidarity network during the pandemic. This solidarity network included teachers from all over Turkey, and in reality, first, it was only a WhatsApp group that held them together. This solidarity network primarily aimed to provide a place for private sector teachers to come together and discuss the problems they were experiencing. During the pandemic, after their online workday ended, teachers would begin their online organizing efforts, spending late into the night discussing the rights violations taking place in the sector and how to prevent them. Teacher Dilek, who joined this solidarity network during its most active period, describes her surprise as follows:

"One of my friends called me and said, 'the teachers are getting together — they've set up this network. Would you join?' I said, 'Sure,' and they added me to a WhatsApp group. It was this solidarity network, and the group had teachers from all over Turkey. The messages were flying in so fast. It was during the pandemic, and all the schools were secretly holding classes even though they weren't supposed to, so, people were asking, 'What's going on here?' I didn't get it. I mean, I understood bits and pieces — they were talking about problems I'd been through too — but the flow was so fast, I could barely keep up."

The expansion of this solidarity network and the subsequent unionization process occurred through friend groups, workplace networks, and social media. While listing the union's hallmarks, Oğuz emphasized the importance of social media in its organizing:

"Like, this union wasn't built through committees in schools or workplaces. It was actually started on Twitter. Pretty much all of the

founding members first got to know each other on Twitter, Instagram, here and there online. It was right toward the end of the pandemic, and none of them had met face-to-face. They were all in different cities, always holding online meetings. So yeah, Twitter and social media became a space where we were really strong and effective. A lot of the teachers we organized — we've never even met them in person. So many people saw us online, supported us, and became members. Honestly, we probably haven't met half of the union face-to-face. We just can't. ... It's the first time I've seen social media play such a huge, foundational role in a union's struggle."

Social media, as Oğuz mentioned, played a crucial role not only in the establishment of the union's predecessor solidarity network, but also in the union's founding, its subsequent efforts to organize, and, as we will discuss later, in organizing its campaigns. This key role can be summarized as follows: despite extremely disorganized working conditions that did not allow for time for organizing, social media served as a means of communication and gathering, forming the foundation for teachers' communication with one another.

The teachers involved in establishing this solidarity network organized various discussions within themselves and within the main group. A significant portion of these teachers came from various leftist traditions in Turkey. Some continued their organized struggles, while others had lost their affiliation due to professional or political differences. In their discussions, these teachers identified the need for a union as a solution to teachers' problems. They shared these findings with the entire solidarity network, and with the majority of network members accepting the necessity of a union, the establishment of the Private Sector Teachers' Union began. Dilek summarized how the need for a union was identified as follows:

"At the end of the day, teachers are workers. They're in the 10th labor branch, and pretty much all the problems we face come from the workplace, the ministry, or the law. But really, every single issue we deal with is rooted in the workplace. So, who defends workers at the workplace? An association? That's not what an association is for. Or a network? No,

that's not it either. Who actually takes on that role? A union. ... Back then in Istanbul, there were maybe ten of us — ten people who didn't even know each other. But you trust them, because the need is obvious, it's out in the open. Like I said earlier, every year we're forced to sign what's basically a pre-written resignation letter. If I said, "I'm not signing," what would happen? They'd threaten me — tell me I couldn't work at another school — because the employers have their own organizations, and they're strong. But we didn't have anything like that. So really, it was a necessity that brought us together. And that same necessity — that's what made the union grow."

In the previous section, we noted that precariousness and proletarianization were among the most significant themes shared by teachers working in private educational institutions. Dilek's statement that teachers are "ultimately workers" is quite significant as a manifestation of this trend. Similarly, Oğuz stated in a conversation we had that teachers are "workers who appear to be white-collar workers and are perceived as such." As frequently stated in the previous section, teachers, working under the "most precarious" conditions with the "least bargaining power," perceived themselves as both "on the brink" and worthless. At the same time, they felt their class position had become more pronounced. The distinction between employers and employees/laborers had become increasingly clear for teachers. This clarification played a significant role in recognizing the need for a union.

Furthermore, the themes of necessity and trust that Dilek mentioned in her speech were consistently mentioned by teachers when describing both their organizing processes and their working conditions. Whether through union formation or not, the necessity of a struggle was felt by many teachers. Ultimately, the establishment of the union established a strong bond between teachers who believed in this struggle.

Thanks to this bond, teachers were able to organize themselves into a union, and the spark that ignited this process was the 'militant minority' within the sector's solidarity network, which had similar outcomes to the militant minority at workplace in Ecre's example above.

The teachers who founded PSTU unknowingly implemented a worker-to-worker model, as described by Blanc³⁶, establishing an independent union by organizing other teachers in their workplaces and across the sector through social media and personal connections. This independent union did not receive assistance from any other union and did not employ any union professionals. All teachers collectively decided on strategy and tactics with the widest possible participation. Additionally, each unionized teacher took on the responsibility of organizing non-unionized teachers.

4.2.1.1 What Kind of Union Should Teachers Establish?

Following the identification of the need for a union, teachers began to consider the question of what kind of a union should be established. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the crisis experienced by the union movement in Turkey had sparked new quests, particularly among young leftists. The activism of the independent union and the decentralized labor movement, which marked the beginning of the year the teachers' union was founded, also inspired teachers. Teachers knew what kind of a union they would not be. They would avoid union movements that were bureaucratic, traditional, cumbersome, lacked worker representation, were anti-democratic, professionalized, and collaborationist. They believed that these types of unions were responsible for the labor movement's current state. On the other hand, they believed that many of these cumbersome, bureaucratic, and traditional unions had previously been militant unions, and that their militant past should be acknowledged and embraced. In various conversations with teachers, we discussed the paths that the militant experiences of some of these unions had opened for the Turkish working class. Likewise, in its early years, the teachers' union had read and discussed important union struggles in Turkey as an internal reading/training program with a small team.

³⁶ Ibid., 40–42.

On the other hand, teachers could not be part of one of these bureaucratic, cumbersome unions. These unions had surpassed the thresholds in various sectors, signed collective bargaining agreements, and were rich and large unions with regular and substantial incomes. Teachers' union, on the other hand, would be a union trying to organize in the 10th industry sector and might not be able to cross the threshold for a long time. From this perspective, it was difficult for teachers to resemble those unions. Moreover, this situation—the union's inability to meet the collective bargaining threshold—was perhaps the most important reason that paved the way for the union to engage in more militant actions.

In various conversations, I asked questions about the union's strategic orientation, and received responses like, "We engage in class unionism" from teachers. However, when I asked them to define class unionism, I encountered two types of responses: either they talked about their militancy or they explained what it was not. The teachers' understanding of class unionism was the organization of an uncompromising, *de facto*-legitimate line of resistance. According to them, in society, just as in the private education sector, workers and employers constituted two classes, and irreconcilable conflicts of interest existed between them. The working class had to organize to prevent employer exploitation and, through militant struggle, protect and advance the interests of the general working class, both sectorally and socially. Their definition was quite consistent with Hyman's³⁷ class pole.

Teachers, struggling to define it so clearly, listed what they were not: they were not a union divided among various political groups or dominated by a single political movement, run by party or union professionals, anti-democratic, lacking worker representation, pacified, bureaucratized, and losing its combative nature. Furthermore, they did not want to establish a decentralized structure based on excessive horizontal organization for fear of bureaucratization. They had a management approach that established a hierarchy to maintain effectiveness and focus, but did not absolutize that hierarchy.

³⁷ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

Most importantly, they rejected the notion of embracing social movement unionism, framing it as a prioritization of social issues over the concerns of teachers. When most educators discussed social movement unionism, they were specifically referring to a union active within the education sector in Turkey. They argued that this union focused more on various ethnic and social issues than on the challenges facing education itself. Consequently, they criticized the union for being disconnected from the teacher rank-and-file.

In numerous conversations, many unionized teachers expressed a similar perspective on social movement unionism, while also emphasizing that this was not the official stance of the union. One reason for this ambivalence was that the criticized union was a close ally, and they did not wish to create a rift with this more established organization. Additionally, they felt it was unnecessary to engage in specific discussions or make decisions regarding social movement unionism. They often shied away from theoretical debates, preferring to avoid discussions grounded in conceptual frameworks. Particularly among leftist teachers, there was a belief that this approach could facilitate the inclusion of grassroots workers in discussions and decision-making processes, akin to syndicalist practices.

While unionized teachers positioned themselves as distinct from and an alternative to social movement unionism, their understanding of it was limited. They perceived it primarily as an approach that prioritized various social issues over working-class concerns, overlooking strategies such as coalition-building, politicizing the union agenda, and gaining public support, some of which they partially implemented. Despite their rejection of this perspective, it is vital to understand their features resembling SMU. GOODIt is due to their opposition to bureaucratization, their politicization of workplace issues while organizing broader anti-neoliberal campaigns—such as those against the privatization of education—and their dedication to direct action and mass protests, which extended

beyond legalistic approaches. These elements align with the strategic framework proposed by social movement unionism³⁸.

PSTU also sought to become an independent union. They believed that being both politically independent and independent from a union-confederation perspective was crucial for establishing and maintaining a combative line. Therefore, they maintained no economic, political, or ideological ties with any confederation or party. This independence stemmed from PSTU's status as a grassroots movement and ensured its continued existence. As teacher Necip stated, PSTU was "a union that turned its attention to teachers/the grassroots." While this independence was important in providing operational and intellectual autonomy, it also brought with it economic weakness. The union not only turned its attention to teachers administratively and strategically, but also depended economically on teachers' contributions.

Consequently, teachers adopted an organizational model akin to the worker-to-worker model³⁹, characterized by workers training and mentoring their peers while playing a crucial role in strategic planning. In this context, teachers were instrumental in the founding of the union and participated in all strategic decisions. Additionally, teachers were responsible for all organizing efforts. Notably, there is not a single member of the union who is not a teacher or a worker from that specific sector (sector 10), and there are no salaried staff members involved.

In other words, PSTU was an independent class union where teachers organize teachers. They embarked on this path by building a dynamic structure that sought to institutionalize centralized democracy—where members could assume responsibilities and duties if they contributed to the union—and by prioritizing their class struggle over all forms of factionalism. In this respect, unionized teachers also emphasized their willingness to experiment with new strategies. They were pleased with the label of “innovation” they were given, and I witnessed them explicitly use this term many times when promoting their union. They tended to

³⁸ Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy*, 243–245.

³⁹ Blanc, *We Are the Union: How Worker-to-Worker Organizing Is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big*.

distinguish themselves not only from mainstream unions but also, as will be discussed later, from other combative unions. The visibility they achieved through these improvised and unplanned actions encouraged them to further highlight this innovative character and to place greater emphasis on it in their self-representation.

The worker-to-worker model enabled the union to expand with remarkable speed, becoming the fastest union to reach thousands of members within just three years, as teachers frequently recalled in everyday conversations. Blanc⁴⁰ emphasizes that this model is particularly effective for rapid scaling because it relies on workers' own initiative to extend the grassroots base of their unions. By initiating drives themselves, training one another, and diffusing tactics laterally across workplaces, workers can generate growth that is both swift and extensive. The Starbucks campaign illustrates this dynamic: baristas in Buffalo mentored employees in distant stores via social media and Zoom, allowing them to replicate organizing structures without the heavy reliance on paid staff organizers⁴¹. By reducing the barriers of cost and geography, worker-to-worker unionism creates the structural conditions for exponential increases in membership.

PSTU organized and scaled up in a similar way: either contact information was collected through surveys on social media and unionized teachers contacted them, or teachers who saw the union on social media joined spontaneously, contacted the union, and organized in their schools, or teachers tried to accumulate unionized teachers by sending their CVs to their schools, a process similar to what Blanc⁴² calls "salting."

Because PSTU is an official union, membership can be made online. The union displays a member's phone number, and if they are not already known within the union, one of the unionized teachers contacts them. The call task is rotated among teachers. This call includes congratulations on their union membership, inquiries about their institution, and any issues that led to their membership. Various guidance is provided

⁴⁰ Ibid., 26.

⁴¹ Ibid., 40–42.

⁴² Ibid., 42.

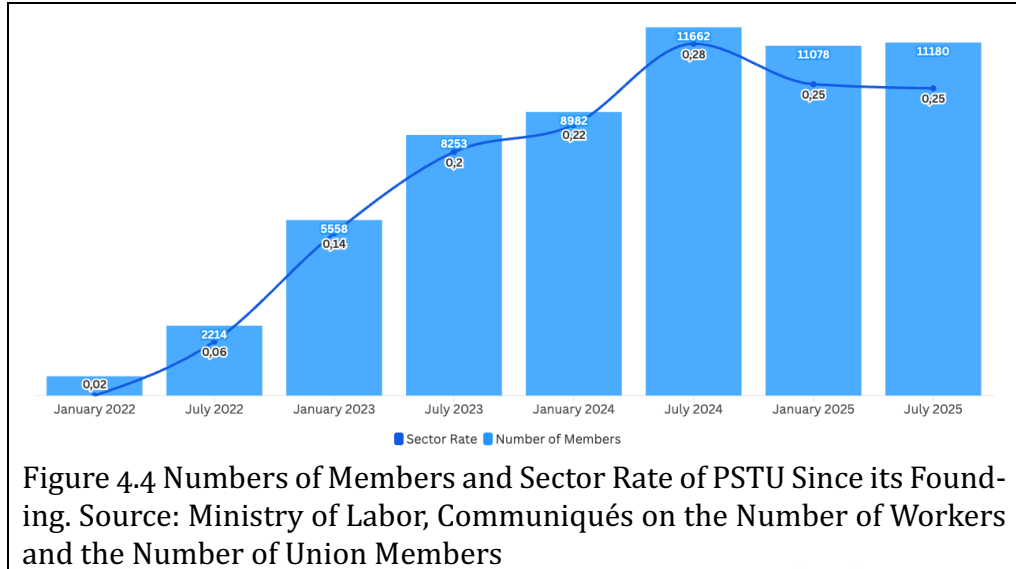
accordingly. Calling members by phone is a tactic that Blanc⁴³ calls "one-on-one organizing conversations" and has found to be frequently used in worker-to-worker organizations. Although this individualized approach requires significant effort and often brings stress, it serves as the foundation of the campaign: at its essence, unionization revolves around fostering trust among colleagues through numerous discussions to help individuals understand that their workplace issues can be addressed only through collective action.

Teacher members are invited to meetings and events organized throughout the province, which are added to WhatsApp groups by province. Some of these invitations are shared publicly via social media, while the majority is shared exclusively with members through these WhatsApp groups. Events, meetings, and actions are crucial for members to meet each other and foster relationships. Those kinds of social gatherings were essential tools for welcoming new members, creating a strong union culture as Blanc⁴⁴ noted.

The number of active members who participate in these meetings, actions, and other activities and maintain regular contact with the union is approximately 1,000 to 1,500. Despite teachers have told me that total number of their unofficial members is 14,000 several times, at the time of this study, the union had precisely 11,180 official members. The difference between official and unofficial numbers is partly because of the de-facto members who cannot be official members of the union since they work informally. Some teachers are forced to work informally, without the appointment from MEB and social security due to tight conditions of labor market. Accordingly, there are approximately 10,000 inactive members who do not participate in any events.

⁴³ Ibid., 78.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 69.



In every province where the union is organized, there are provincial councils and their provincial representatives. The number of these councils and representatives varies depending on the density of the organization in the province. For example, in Istanbul, where the largest organization is located, the number of provincial council members is 40, and the number of provincial representatives is 7. A provincial council can consist of at least 3 members. If the number of organizations in the province falls below this number, no council is formed. The number of provincial representatives can be at least 2. Members join the provincial councils through elections. Provincial representatives are also elected in these councils. Local actions organized in the provinces (for example, holding a press conference in front of a school in Antalya) are decided upon and implemented in the provincial councils. The union's general actions are decided upon by the assembly, called the Representative Assembly, which includes provincial representatives from all provinces.

The Representative Assembly and the Central Executive Board are two bodies that work together. While the Central Executive Board (MYK) is the central decision-making body, decisions made by the MYK must also pass through the Representative Assembly. Decisions in the assemblies are made by qualified majority. The MYK is elected at the annual General Assembly. The General Assembly is a process held with the

participation of all members, where candidates are introduced and voting takes place. Votes are cast by secret ballot and open counting. In all these respects, the union has a precedent for democratic functioning. Indeed, unionized teachers place great importance on democratic functioning and are highly critical of situations they perceive as undermining this.

There were various ways for a teacher to join a union. The most common were joining after seeing the union action on social media or discovering the union while seeking support for a workplace issue. During my fieldwork, I observed dozens of teachers joining the union seeking legal or organizational support. Meanwhile, the union's founding team found each other through social media, and some met through friends. The vast majority of the current 14,000 members gained their memberships through large-scale demonstrations that brought the union to the national agenda or trending topics on social media. These demonstrations included the Parliamentary sit-in, various demonstrations (such as those in front of employers' associations), and school raids, all of which will be explained below. Regarding the impact of school raids on membership numbers, Semiha said:

"Let me give you an example from Esenyurt Angı prep school. The teachers there hadn't been paid. They weren't union members either. But because the conditions at those places were so bad—and still are—we don't really insist on membership at first. If a teacher asks for help, we go. These teachers usually don't know much about their rights, and the schools are in terrible shape. Their jobs are super insecure.

So we went there, pushed hard, and in the end, the teachers got their salaries. After that, every single one of them joined the union. These were people who had no idea what the union was, had never met us before. They're working at some faraway school, no chance of contact. So it's normal they feel distant. But once they see you in person, right there, they feel that trust—and they sign up right away."

The police intervention and torture that occurred during many of the press conferences served to bring the union to the forefront and ensure

its voice was heard. For example, the press conference and sit-in held in front of the Turkish Private Schools Association (TÖZOK) in August 2023 culminated in the detention of teachers. According to many teachers, this detention and assault brought the union back into the national spotlight: it is unlikely the protests would have garnered such a significant response without the police's harsh intervention.

"You know, what really affects how much exposure you get is how the police treat you. Like, for example, if the police hadn't intervened in front of TÖZOK — if we'd just made our press statement and left — it wouldn't have made nearly as much noise. But when the police detain you, beat you, put you in handcuffs behind your back, that gets a reaction." (Ecre)

As a result of the MDC Schools' protest described above, Ecre, who now serves on the union's Central Executive Committee, and approximately 30 other people joined the union. Such school protests or workplace problems are important processes through which union memberships are forged.

Finally, unionized teachers, especially active members, strive to organize their own schools out of a sense of moral responsibility toward the union and its struggles. By bringing the problems experienced in their schools to the union, they attempt to mobilize within the schools, thereby expanding the union's membership and reach.

As a result, the union reached 14,000 members three years after its founding, making it Turkey's fastest-growing union. Unionized teachers attribute this growth primarily to their actions that increase public visibility, noting a significant increase in membership, particularly during the sit-in in front of the parliament.

4.2.2 Social Media Activism

"In every school we went to, we ran into something different — and we shared all of it on social media." (Dilek)

Up to this point, I have explained how teachers form unions by meeting each other on social media, and that new members join unions

through social media visibility. But PSTU's social media presence was not limited to this. The union used social media as a means of communication and organization, as a campaign and a PR tool. The primary goal of social media has always been to increase visibility. The greater the visibility, the more members and supporters the teachers' struggle attracts, and the more their employers and the ministry find themselves cornered.

The first example of social media being used as a tool for struggle is exposure. Although exposures were mostly made in the form of press statements in front of schools, this was not possible in the early years of the union. Furthermore, it was not always possible to convince teachers who wanted to remain anonymous to make a press statement. But regardless of whether a press statement was made or not, social media activism played a very important role in institutional exposures.

For example, Necip, took the initiative to open social media accounts called "Pacific College Teachers" to publicize problems related to the school he worked at and to inform parents and the general public. Teachers working at the same institution shared the problems they experienced by writing them in notebooks provided by the institution and bearing the institution's name. These posts were sent to the target audience by the account, thereby exposing the institution to parents without any connection to the teachers. The same account also created a video that humorously described the working conditions of teachers by editing promotional videos of the private school. This video was removed from circulation shortly thereafter due to copyright issues, and the school administration subsequently filed a lawsuit against the union, but the case was dismissed shortly thereafter.

Tagging on social media was also an important tool that enabled the exposure mechanism to work. Tagging directly mentioned the name of the school, which attracted the attention of parents. Teachers from different schools also supported these tags through solidarity accounts, thus creating solidarity between schools. As seen in the MDC Schools resistance example, school administrations listening to teachers' demands was not always the case, but it largely depended on whether or not there was pressure from parents.

The union did not implement a full-blown strategic research and corporate campaign⁴⁵ during its exposé process. However, teachers had identified the pressure points of these private education companies and acted accordingly. This pressure point was the perception of the school by its customers, that is, the parents; efforts were made to damage the school's image through exposés naming the school and its administrators.

Social media was not merely a tool for exposure or struggle. Teachers used social media to host various live streams and chat rooms, where they discussed their issues, shared updates from ongoing protests, thereby both raising public awareness and increasing their own visibility. Furthermore, by hosting live streams from protests and sit-ins, they provided followers and supporters who could not be there in person with the opportunity to follow the action. Thousands of viewers/listeners have participated in these chat rooms and live streams so far.

Sharing content about the call to action and the demands of the action before and after the actions took place ensured that the public was informed about the content, reasons, and demands of the teachers' struggle, and increased their visibility by encouraging the media to share the content by tagging their own accounts.

The effective use of social media has addressed communication challenges arising from teachers working independently across various institutions. In overcoming these obstacles, PSTU also harnessed social media to attract public attention, leveraging it for their cause, similar to approaches taken by many unions⁴⁶. Both social media activism and the dissemination of action images on these platforms played a crucial role in facilitating communication among teachers from different schools, fostering organization in new locations, and garnering public support.

These tactics also suggest parallels with SMU approach particularly corporate campaigns aimed at reputational disruption. While not coordinated via formal union research teams, PSTU's social media

⁴⁵ Juravich, "Beating Global Capital:"

⁴⁶ Blanc, *We Are the Union: How Worker-to-Worker Organizing Is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big*, 189.

mobilizations and school-front protests served similar functions: naming and shaming abusive employers, exposing labor violations, and applying pressure not through legal means but through public visibility and solidarity.

4.2.3 *Legal Support Days*

One of the most innovative strategies developed by the PSTU was the organization of “legal support days,” held every Friday after working hours at the union’s office or sit-in sites. Volunteer lawyers joined these gatherings to provide counseling on contractual ambiguities, dismissal threats, unpaid wages, and other violations. Over time, the sessions moved beyond individual advice: they became collective arenas where teachers shared experiences, compared cases, and deliberated on which course of action the union should pursue. In this sense, legal support days functioned as strategic junctions in the union’s repertoire, linking everyday grievances to broader tactics such as filing official complaints, organizing school raids, or holding demonstrations. By addressing the pervasive legal ambiguity in the private education sector—exemplified by widespread drawer contracts—these meetings fostered both empowerment and trust among teachers. They also reinforced the union’s legitimacy: providing concrete, immediate support distinguished PSTU from bureaucratized unions that often remained distant from the rank-and-file. As Ceren emphasized, employment of legal support days was crucial for teachers to mingle in the union and participate in the action:

“I found some of the mechanisms for developing relationships with certain members really effective. For example, having Friday as ‘legal support day’—a set time when teachers could come and get help. Representatives would also be there. And it wasn’t just about legal support; everyone tried to make it a space for people to get to know the union as well. I really liked that.”

The establishment of legal support days was both a response to and a consequence of sectoral legal ambiguity. Teachers were routinely subjected to rights violations, often without knowing their legal status or remedies. Recognizing this lack of awareness as a critical barrier to

organizing, the union prioritized building legal expertise from the outset. In its early years, members studied the regulations governing employment in private education and began advising colleagues directly. As the union grew, it reached out to volunteer lawyers from diverse backgrounds, who rotated on Fridays to provide support. Through WhatsApp groups, members were regularly informed about the presence of these lawyers, turning Fridays into a predictable and reliable space for solidarity, knowledge-sharing, and tactical decision-making.

Legal support days thus served a dual purpose: they functioned not only as a means to reduce legal uncertainty—essentially operating as an ongoing legal awareness campaign—but also as strategic planning sessions. Through consultations with lawyers, experienced teachers—preferably those familiar with the school in question—and union activists, concrete procedures and roadmaps were developed to address rights violations. This process often involved mapping school administrations to identify structural vulnerabilities and tailoring strategies accordingly, which made these meetings a modest yet effective form of strategic research. Moreover, Legal support days played a crucial role in protecting teachers against union-busting. By equipping members with legal protection and reinforcing collective solidarity, they reduced vulnerability to employer intimidation and institutionalized a culture of resilience within the union.

4.2.4 *Use of Complaint and Inspection Mechanisms*

Private educational institutions are structures that operate under the supervision of the MEB. In other words, no private educational institution can provide education without the approval of the MEB. Similarly, no teacher can formally work at these institutions without being officially appointed by the MEB.

However, as explained above, the employment of teachers working at private educational institutions involves legal ambiguity since it is unclear which law determines their personal rights and which law regulates their working conditions. Despite this uncertainty, since these are educational institutions and teachers are appointed by the MEB meaning they

are actually MEB personnel, the MEB has the authority to supervise these schools.

For this reason, the union has utilized official complaint mechanisms in various cases where teachers' rights have been violated. Procedural tactics such as writing petitions and using complaint mechanisms are frequently seen in the first worker-to-worker organizing attempts⁴⁷. Complaints have been filed with provincial and district national education directorates in an effort to ensure that institutions are inspected. For example, during days of heavy snowfall, even the provincial and district staff of the Ministry of National Education were unclear as to whether the governor's decision to suspend education throughout the province also applied to private educational institutions. When the union asked the relevant directorates about this issue and requested an inspection as a result of complaints received, the relevant authorities were confronted with such a question for the first time. Upon reviewing the relevant legislation, it was determined that the educational break also applied to private educational institutions. As a result, the union submitted a petition to the Istanbul Provincial Directorate of National Education, listing the names and documents of institutions found to be operating during the snow break. However, the inspection mechanism did not function effectively:

"So, the governor's office says schools in Istanbul are closed. But our members are telling me, "Teacher, yeah, they canceled school, but we still have to go in tomorrow." Public school teachers? They stay home. Private school teachers? Off to work. So, what are we supposed to do?

We call the Ministry of Education — and even they don't have a clear answer. Why? Because no one has ever asked, "Can private schools hold classes during a snow day?" before. So, we dig, we push the Provincial Directorate of Education, and guess what — turns out, no, private schools can't hold classes. But, of course, they still do.

First, we get the official confirmation they're not allowed. Then we gather all the complaints, put them together in one nice, tidy petition,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 75, 96–98.

and hand it to the Directorate. A month later — yes, a month — they finally visit the school and ask, “So, did you hold classes during the snow day?” The school goes, “Nope, we didn’t.” And just like that — case closed.” (Dilek)

A similar situation occurred with private schools that continued to employ teachers during mid-term breaks, thereby violating the principle of equality in education and depriving teachers of their vacation rights without paying overtime. The union took action in response to the complaints and submitted documentation to the relevant department of the MEB detailing which institutions continued education despite the break, requesting that the necessary inspections be carried out. However, the inspection process was not implemented, and an inspection report was prepared that dismissed the complaints about the schools where teachers had documented and personally witnessed that education continued.

These problems are not limited to inspections conducted in response to complaints of rights violations. Even in routine school inspections conducted by the MEB, the institutions to be inspected are notified in advance, and the institutions warn teachers about the inspection and ensure that any shortcomings are addressed. Inspections are carried out for show, and false reports are created in exchange for bribes. As a result, private educational institutions are not effectively inspected.

“And you know, the private sector is almost completely free from any real inspection— inspectors just sort of drop by whenever. Like in Bahçeşehir, for example — an inspector came to the school to “inspect,” but instead, he signed his kid up with a tuition discount and left. I’ve actually seen that happen. And before inspectors even show up, we get a heads-up. They send a message to the group chat: “Hey, the inspector’s coming on this date.” I mean, is that even an inspection? It’s all planned, announced in advance. We adjust the class registers, lesson plans, everything to make it look perfect for that day. Because honestly, there’s no real inspection going on. The relationships are way too cozy. It’s all just a back-and-forth deal.” (Ecre)

The use of complaint mechanisms, inspections, and exhaustion of these official channels play an important role in the union's struggle. Once

these legal complaint and inspection mechanisms were exhausted, unionized teachers believed that their actions, which they described as a “de facto-legitimate struggle,” had gained legitimacy. In other words, despite exhausting all legal and legitimate avenues, when rights violations could not be prevented, they were forced to resort to de facto-legitimate methods. The next subheading will elaborate on this de facto-legitimate struggle.

4.2.5 *School Raids and De Facto-Legitimate Struggle*

Before delving into the case of school raids, it is necessary to clarify what I mean by de facto legitimacy. By this concept, I refer to practices that may not have a solid basis in law (*de jure*), but nonetheless gain recognition as legitimate because they emerge directly from the lived injustices of workers and are sustained by collective solidarity. In other words, these actions are not legally sanctioned, yet they acquire legitimacy in practice, both through their effectiveness in addressing violations and through the moral justification teachers attach to them. Complaints about the violation of teachers' rights in the private sector, the Ministry of Education's inadequate inspections, high deregulation, and the arbitrary practices of institutional administrations taking advantage of this lack of oversight have pushed the Teachers' Union to seek such different approaches. As teacher Dilek stated, the union, saying “the burden has fallen on us,” developed a new and bold method in response to the blockage of traditional avenues: school raids.

School raids did not originate from desk-bound theories or planned meetings; on the contrary, they developed entirely in the field, as a result of the difficulties encountered, by trial and error, and spontaneously. Teacher Dilek describes the process of developing this method as follows:

“You know, these are things you only figure out through experience — they don’t happen overnight. We went through all that, and after a while, we kind of settled into our own way of doing things.”

During these raids, union members went to private educational institutions that were open on public holidays to defend teachers' rights.

Although the reactions they received varied, they were successful most of the time. In one institution, the principal sent the students home in fear and paid the teachers' salaries, while in another institution, there was an argument, the police were called, and the situation spread on social media. As news of the raids and these incidents spread, the rate of work on holidays at private educational institutions dropped significantly. In fact, one school was sealed by the police and closed for three days on the grounds that it had failed to comply with the governor's decision.

The critical point was that during such a de-facto legitimate action, phone cameras should always be on and everything should be recorded as much as possible. This would allow them to prove what was really happening and use it as evidence in potential court cases, as well as material on social media for exposing the school and promoting the union. The need for cameras to be on at all times was also highlighted in the significant worker-to-worker unionization efforts in the US. Casey Moore, one of the militant minority who ignited union organizing efforts at Buffalo Starbucks stores, said: "Whenever I hear about a store that's about to go on a walkout or march on the boss, I'm always like, 'Record everything!' because that's going to be great to publicize—and otherwise, it might not even get picked up by the media⁴⁸".

School raids can actually be considered a form of implementation of the march-on-the-boss tactic⁴⁹. Teachers would approach school administrators to voice their demands, and by doing so in a public and publicly visible manner, they would attempt to establish themselves as the dominant party. As will be discussed below, school raids, like the march-on-the-boss, had the effect of increasing organizing and bolstering workers' courage⁵⁰.

While no union would be expected to storm employers' offices to demand accountability, the Teachers' Union managed to do just that. Dilek

⁴⁸ Ibid., 232.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 181; J. Lepie, "Is There a Winning Formula for Union Organizing?," *Employ Respons Rights J* 26 (2014): 137–52.

⁵⁰ C. Cant and J. Woodcock, "Fast Food Shutdown: From Disorganisation to Action in the Service Sector," *Capital & Class* 44, no. 4 (2020): 513–21.

explains that the source of this courage was the shared anger toward employers, whom she describes as “lawless, neighborhood thugs”, and solidarity among teachers.

“There are a lot of local tough-guy types here — people who don’t care about the law, dodge taxes, that kind of crowd. When we call them out, they just say, “Go ahead, complain wherever you want.” You file a complaint, the inspector shows up two months later, makes a deal with the school owner, and leaves. So, who’s going to protect the teacher? That means we’ve got to confront these employers ourselves. Like, if I’m working at School A, I can only push back against my own employer so much — I don’t want to get fired. But the owner of School B? He’s not my employer. So, I can fight for the teacher who works there. And that teacher can fight for me. That’s solidarity. Everyone knows teachers are being exploited in these schools. They get reported to the Ministry of Education, but nothing changes. So, there’s no other choice — we have to take them on with our own grit and courage, face-to-face, and win.

And this isn’t random. It’s a method we’ve tested by trying different approaches. That’s why it’s such a legitimate and right way to fight.”

This solidarity reinforced the teachers' trust in each other and their sense of righteousness. This enabled those who carried out the raids to stand up to the employer. Dilek attributes this courage to the “very legitimate and justified” nature of the action, adding:

“When I walk into that school, I already know — the exact same thing is happening at my own school. I’m going through it too. It’s anger that makes you do this, really. There’s this young, burning anger driving it all.”

The fact that school raids are legally debatable shows that the union is pursuing a de facto-legitimate line of struggle. Legally, it is not possible for a union to raid the management of any workplace. Indeed, numerous lawsuits were filed against the union as a result of these raids. However, the relevant prosecutors ruled that they were justified on the grounds of what in Turkish law is defined as “being caught red-handed,” meaning that the violation was taking place at the very moment the union intervened. In this sense, the prosecutors recognized the legitimacy of the

raids on the basis that the union was directly confronting an ongoing unlawful act, and the cases ended in acquittals. Oğuz emphasizes that this de facto-legitimate struggle has actually opened up a new legal field:

“Technically, there’s no legal basis for storming these schools. It’s like... it’s not legitimate — but it kind of is. We’ve been reported so many times, and every single time, we were proven right. One prosecutor even said, “This is a case of catching them in the act.” We’ve been acquitted in so many cases.

So, in a way, we’ve actually opened up a new legal space. If a crime is being committed, we can step in right then and there and catch it in the act... and that’s what we’ve done. The union stepped up for its members, showing that when their rights are violated, it will be right there with them. And that made a huge impact.”

This situation concretely demonstrated the union's presence and power in the field. The school raids not only reduced rights violations but also fostered a strong culture of solidarity among teachers, increased the union's visibility, and led to a surge in membership.

The teachers' union's school raids were not based on legal grounds, but rather on the legitimacy of the teachers' cause and the fact that school administrators were violating their rights. In other words, even if they were not legal, they were legitimate in practice. On the other hand, thousands of workers experience many injustices every day, such as the violation of teachers' rights to vacation in the context of labor relations. Despite this, such de facto-legitimate actions, ranging from illegal strikes to various alternative forms of resistance, are quite rare in Turkey. When we discussed the reasons for this, the teachers said that their unions and their struggles were still young, and that the fact that they were still a dynamic movement rather than an institutionalized, bureaucratic structure also played a role.

“Our union isn’t a comfort-zone kind of union. People don’t like leaving their comfort zones. If something’s become routine, they struggle to try something new. A lot of unions are like that — they have a hard time experimenting. We didn’t. Because we didn’t have some fixed way of

doing things. We were new. And if we'd had a professional unionist on payroll, a salaried staffer, I don't think it would've happened this way.

The idea of storming a school didn't come from, 'Hey guys, schools are working on an official holiday, what should we do?' — 'Let's go raid the place!' — 'Oh great idea, let's do it.' No. It couldn't have started like that. How did it happen? Exactly like I said before — naturally. We went to the Ministry of Education, nothing happened. 'Okay, so what now? Let's go talk to a employer.' We talked, we argued when we had to, and the problem got solved. Experience. The real work gets done in the street.

Sure, we've read plenty of books on union history, had endless sit-down debates, but none of us ever thought, 'Let's just go storm the school.' That idea came while we were out there, moving, looking for solutions on the street. And honestly, I think that's how unions find the right approach — by being out in the field, trying to solve things on the ground. Unions that are fed only by some central leadership can't discover that unless the center is actually out there, in the street." (Dilek)

Dilek's account revealed how effective and legitimate this struggle was, fueled not by a union center which is not engaged with the field but by the dynamics of the field itself and shaped by the collective anger of teachers. It also clearly highlighted the difference between the teachers' union and traditional unions.

4.2.6 Demonstrations

Since its founding, the union has issued numerous demonstrations. The purpose of these demonstrations was to voice its demands, increase its public visibility, and pressure decision-makers toward its own demands. Protesting in front of the work is a prevalent tactic employed during worker-to-worker unionization drives⁵¹. As previously stated, the union's fundamental operational logic was to first attract public attention, then highlight grievances and demands, thereby pressuring the

⁵¹ Blanc, *We Are the Union: How Worker-to-Worker Organizing Is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big*, 181.

administration through public support, and thus gathering power and progress toward achieving its demands. In this context, the union has issued numerous significant demonstrations. In this section, I will discuss the most frequently mentioned demonstrations within the union as steps that furthered the struggle.

The union issued two types of demonstrations: workplace-specific and general. In workplace-specific releases, the union aimed to expose rights violations specific to that workplace. For example, on July 23, 2025, a demonstration was held in front of MOL Schools. Focusing on the mobbing, harassment, and wage and vacation theft experienced by teachers at the institution, it exposed the school administration's general hostility towards workers and especially women. The solidarity organization of the neighborhood where the school building is located also participated in this demonstration, stating that the school principal had attempted to cut down the neighborhood's magnificent plane trees during the construction and landscaping of the school buildings. It's important to note that the coalition-building with community groups tactic⁵² used in the MOL schools action hasn't been used anywhere else, nor has the union undertaken any such initiatives. This deficiency has neither compromised the union's effectiveness nor caused stagnation in recruitment efforts. However, as I will discuss in the chapter four, it could be considered a remedy for the gradual erosion of grassroots dynamism. This action generated widespread social media coverage, tarnishing the image of FIDOL Schools and its owner. Further evidence of the effectiveness of this action is the school principal's threats against the union and the unionized teachers he had dismissed, which began the day the action was announced and escalated after the action itself.

I explained that workplace-specific demonstrations serve as a mechanism for exposure. Another significance of these actions, as in the case of school raids, is the sense of solidarity felt by the victimized teachers. Teachers felt that their union was on their side and supporting them, and that their unionized colleagues were standing behind them, which

⁵² Ibid.

strengthened their sense of belonging and loyalty to the union. Thus, a process of mutual empowerment took place, with support and strength being transferred from the individual to the union and from the union to the individual.

Second, the union organized demonstrations and actions to advocate for its general demands for solutions to the problems prevalent in the sector. The union had four fundamental and general demands in response to the precarious conditions and injustices in the sector: i) the legalization of an equal base salary for teachers in private sector to those at the public sector, ii) the implementation of legal regulations to ensure that teachers are employed under permanent contracts rather than fixed-term contracts, iii) full equality with public school teachers in terms of personal rights and conditions (e.g., the ability to obtain a green passport with visa exemption, as public school teachers do), and iv) the separation of the education and fine arts sector from the 10th sector. These demands primarily concerned the Ministry and the Parliament. Since teachers were Ministry personnel, the Ministry could implement partial improvements in line with these demands. On the other hand, since these demands required various legal regulations, they could only be achieved through legislative activity in the Parliament, so, teachers also had to target Parliament. Finally, another party to these demands was the employers and employer associations⁵³ that represented them. Teachers had also pressured employer associations to respond to their demands.

Within the scope of advocating for these demands, democratic and peaceful protests were held, and it was expected that the respect for teachers in society would have a mobilizing effect, meaning that teachers would be supported by the general public. Indeed, they achieved their goals. Below, I will explain some of the demonstrations that are

⁵³ Private school owners in Turkey have multiple associations. These associations differ depending on the political and social segments they appeal to. These associations include the Private Schools Association of Turkey (TÖZÖK), the All Private Education Institutions Association (TÖDER), and the Private Teaching Institutions and Private Education Institutions Association (ÖZDEBİR).

frequently mentioned in the union and are often referred to by unionized teachers as important turning points in their struggle.

4.2.6.1 Demonstration in Front of the Ministry of National Education, August 30, 2022

The union was founded on August 30, 2021. After a year of organizing, on the first anniversary of the union's founding, they wanted to hold a demonstration in front of the MEB to voice their demands regarding the general injustices in the sector and their solutions. However, they were prevented by the police and taken into custody under torture, and were unable to hold their demonstration. Ironically, their harsh detention in this way brought teachers to the forefront of the country's agenda. Teacher Dilek describes how the police prevented them from holding the demonstration they wanted to make in front of the Ministry, how they were beaten and tortured during their detention, and the results of the action as follows:

"The police told us, 'You can't go to the Ministry with slogans.' So we said, 'Fine, we'll go without slogans.' They said, 'No, you can't go like that either.' So here we are — we've gathered, we have a demand, and one of the party we need to address is the Ministry. We want to speak, and they're saying, 'No, you can't.' So, we lined up and decided to march. And as soon as we started, the police hit us with violence. They used pepper spray. We were linked arm-in-arm. Some of us didn't scatter, some went back. We told everyone, 'If anyone wants to leave, you can. The police said they'll intervene.' But our friends stayed. The ones who got hit hardest by the pepper spray stepped back, and once they felt a bit better, they came back up to the front.

That day, we were 400 people. We moved forward, got pushed back, moved forward again. Then there was the first round of arrests. If I'm remembering right, six of our friends were taken. I didn't even see it — I was in the back, trying to get my eyes open. Then, while we were shouting for our friends to be released and the road to be cleared, there was a second round of arrests. I was in that second group.

And then... while we were in custody, we'd somehow become the most talked-about thing in the country. The then Interior Minister made a statement, Erdoğan made a statement, Kılıçdaroğlu made a statement. And for the first time ever, the problems of private-sector teachers were being discussed on TV. People were realizing, 'Oh, there are teachers in the private sector? And they don't actually make that much money?'

That night, when we got out of custody, we watched the debates on TV. People were talking about it — but talking about it wrong. Nobody really knew the facts. There wasn't a single expert on this sector. We realized we'd brought a totally unknown issue into the national conversation.

The next day, tons of TV stations were calling the union, wanting to meet. And the Ministry called too, saying, 'Come in for a meeting.' So, on August 31, we met with the Minister at the time, Mahmut Özer. One day earlier, they wouldn't even let us walk to the Ministry. The next day, we were sitting at the same table with the Minister."

Teacher Dilek's account essentially epitomizes how the union uses demonstrations as a strategic tool. The action generated public visibility, brought the issue to the national agenda, and, thanks to the public support received, both the union and its sectoral demands gained more support. Furthermore, the police's harsh intervention provoked a backlash against the government, forcing the Ministry to address teachers.

After this action, the union maintained negotiations with the Ministry at a certain level. Various diplomatic processes were undertaken to address their demands. These processes will be discussed in Section 4.2.8 under the heading "Diplomacy" below. The crucial point here is that these diplomatic processes were always supported by collective actions such as demonstrations, and the public support generated by these demonstrations was instrumentalized as a tool to strengthen the union's position in these diplomatic negotiations. Furthermore, this same public support translated into public pressure on the government, ministry bureaucrats, and parties that failed to grant teachers the rights they demanded. Therefore, at every critical juncture, the union attempted to

increase public support and increase pressure on ministry bureaucrats by mobilizing new resources.

4.2.6.2 Demonstration in Front of the Employers' Association, August 30, 2023

"Of course, we kept up our actions for a base salary from time to time. Some periods got really heated — there were petition drives, more meetings with the Ministry. But through all of it, we never stopped saying, 'The employers are part of this, too.'

Because the base salary was removed at the employers' request. And if it's ever going to come back, the Ministry and Parliament will definitely make a deal with the employers. That's given. That's why we kept confronting the employers' associations, like TÖZOK and TÖDER.

In fact, for our second anniversary — August 30 — we held our action in front of TÖZOK. We went there to say, 'You're part of this. You're the ones exploiting us.' And right there, in Taksim Square, we were arrested again. It made the news — 'Teachers detained again.' That was our union's second action that ended with arrests." (Dilek)

On the second anniversary of the union's founding, the union had begun holding meetings with the Ministry and all parties in Parliament. Nearly a year had passed since the first meeting with the Ministry, but concrete steps had still not been taken. The union was aware that the employers, another party to this issue, were trying to stall and slow down the process, as their demands would increase employers' costs and reduce their profit margins. Therefore, the union decided to target the employers' associations and damage their public image and legitimacy. To portray them as part of the process and the hardships they were experiencing, they held a press conference in front of the Private Schools Association of Turkey (TÖZOK), an employers' association in Istanbul, on the second anniversary of the union's founding. This press conference culminated in the detention of the teachers, and according to many teachers, this detention and assault brought the union back into the national spotlight. The

police's harsh intervention also increased the public visibility and support they received for the protests.

"You know, what really determines how much attention something gets is how the police treat you. Like, in front of TÖZOK — if the police hadn't intervened, if we'd just made our press statement and left, it wouldn't have made nearly as much noise. But when they detain you, beat you, twist your arms behind your back — that gets a reaction. People think, 'Wow, they're even hitting teachers. They're even arresting teachers.' And then they ask, 'Where are the teachers?' Well, at TÖZOK. And what's TÖZOK? A employers' association. So, to keep the employers' associations comfortable, they beat up teachers who are holding a press conference or a sit-in there. In a way, they're exposing themselves. Like I said, if they'd just let us do it, it wouldn't have gotten half the attention." (Ecre)

4.2.6.3 Ankara Parliament Park Protest, January 29, 2024

The minimum wage increase rate, determined and announced at the beginning of each year through negotiations between the Ministry of Labor and union confederations, was not fully reflected in the wages of teachers working in the private sector in Turkey. Consequently, teachers' wages were often close to the minimum wage, or even below it, even if it is illegal. This was not just a problem for private sector teachers; the vast majority of private sector employees suffered from a similar problem. Furthermore, even in workplaces where the announced minimum wage increase rates were implemented, this rate was already below annual inflation, leading to unrest and backlash. As we explained in Introduction, a wave of protests erupted across Türkiye at the beginning of each year, particularly since 2021. The teachers' union, as part of this wave, channeled the anger over teachers' wages being equal to or even below the minimum wage. As we spoke about this collective action, they wanted to revive their demands for base salaries and hold a demonstration in the park next to the Turkish Grand National Assembly on January 29, 2024, to force the new Minister of National Education, Yusuf Tekin, who took

office after the 2023 General Elections, to end his refusal to give the union an appointment, and to secure an appointment with the minister.

Teachers gathered in Parliament Park at 1:00 PM on January 29th and spent hours trying to break through the police barrier in Ankara's notorious winter cold. Despite police warnings to disperse, they remained in the square, waiting, negotiating, and stating that the protest would continue until they received an appointment from Minister Yusuf Tekin. As a result of the protest, they received an appointment from the Ministry.

The protest in Parliament Park shocked left-wing public opinion in Ankara and across Turkey. Intending to protest in Parliament Park, avoiding arrest, and ultimately winning the request (successfully securing an appointment with the Minister) was unprecedented. Teacher Dilek describes this shock as follows:

"When we held our action at Parliament Park on January 29, people were saying, 'They protested in Parliament Park, tried to march toward Parliament — and they weren't even detained.' Until that day, no other group had ever managed that. That's the legitimacy we've built in society — partly from being teachers, and partly from the wins the union has achieved and the trust we've built with our base.

I mean, if we were just some 'teachers' union' that had never actually earned teachers' trust or solved their problems, we would've been detained right there. But our crowd protects us fiercely. They believe in us."

In other words, Dilek directly links the teachers' union's power of action to themes such as the trust and honesty it instills in both its members and the general public. In this sense, the union made significant contributions to the overall class struggle by opening up new legal and illegal spaces, just as it did with the school raids.

The meetings held at the Ministry following the January 29th protests had raised the union's hopes. The new Minister stated that he knew and followed the union, understood their aims with their work, and that these demands would be met. Minister Tekin himself stated that the amendments to the Teaching Profession Law (ÖMK), which would be brought to Parliament's agenda in the summer of that year, would legalize the base

salary, a fundamental demand of private sector teachers. Teacher Oğuz recounts that meeting as follows:

"During that action, we met with Minister Tekin for the first time. In that meeting, he was like, 'Yes, I know you, I'm aware of what you're trying to do. I already understand all this — we'll make it happen.' They told us, 'Just wait until summer, until the Teachers' Professional Law (ÖMK). It'll go through in the ÖMK.'"

Teachers waited, as promised by the Minister. As summer vacation approached, teachers prepared for actions to be taken during the relevant parliamentary committee's deliberations. Unfortunately, the teachers learned that the promises would not be kept:

"When we went to Ankara on January 29, Minister Tekin told us we'd get the base salary in April. But then we waited... and waited... and nothing. In April, the Minister went on a TV program. As a union, we organized teachers to flood the show — sending messages, calling in, posting comments, all asking about the base salary. The host finally asked, 'So, is the base salary coming?' And the Minister said, 'That's not on our agenda.' If we hadn't pushed for that question, we'd probably still be waiting. He lied to us. And if we don't respond, they'll just keep lying like that. Honestly, no one really had the energy to go back to Ankara at that point — it's a long process to organize something like that properly. But we still went, exhausted, to Ankara. Over 100 of us came from Istanbul. Fewer came from other provinces. But that day, the march was incredibly big." (Semiha)

As a result, demonstrations functioned not only as routine activities for voicing demands within the union's repertoire of struggles, but also as a form of action central to its organizational strategy. This method, implemented in both "workplace-specific" and "general" formats, had an impact on two levels: First, it served to directly expose and discredit rights violations in targeted workplaces by making them visible; second, it reinforced bonds of belonging and collective identity by building a strong sense of solidarity among teachers. Thus, demonstrations functioned not only as a tool for public opinion formation but also as a source of morale and motivation within the organization.

Demonstrations focusing on general demands, on the other hand, employed a multifaceted pressure strategy by simultaneously targeting different addressees, such as the Ministry, Parliament, and employers' associations. These actions ensured public recognition of teachers' just demands while also calling into question the legitimacy of the addressee institutions in the public eye. Police interventions, in particular, increased the visibility of the protests and the level of social support, as envisioned by the teachers. The backlash, fueled by the rhetoric of "violence even against teachers", both strengthened the union's legitimacy and deepened the opposition's exposure.

In this context, demonstrations emerged as a method that paved the way for the union's diplomatic initiatives, strengthened its position at the negotiating table, and generated mobilization at critical junctures. The cyclical relationship between action and diplomacy supported the union's demands not only through written negotiations but also through public pressure generated on the ground. Thus, demonstrations became established within the union's strategic logic as both a confrontational and legitimacy-generating tool, providing visibility in the short term and organizational capacity and negotiating power in the medium term.

4.2.7 *The Great Sit-in of Teachers*

Teachers wanted the ÖMK, which was to be discussed in Parliament in June, to include regulations to improve the working conditions of private sector teachers, particularly their base salaries. The minister made this promise after the January protest, and the union shared this promise with its members. However, work in this direction is not progressing, and the Minister stated in a TV show he participated in that "there is no such agenda." Teachers felt that they had been lied to, that their trust in the minister had been shaken, that this minister was the minister of employers rather than teachers, and they demanded the minister's resignation.

Consequently, teachers gathered in Ankara on May 26, 2024 to influence the ÖMK discussions that will come to Parliament in June⁵⁴. With this action, the union wanted to influence both political parties and the ministry and put them under public pressure, that is, to seize the moment⁵⁵. Seizing moments is a powerful strategy designed to rally public support and exert political pressure by thoughtfully identifying key pressure points. This approach involves taking decisive actions that amplify visibility and awareness. It can be realized through a variety of methods, including organized protests and strikes, as well as more creative and innovative tactics that capture attention and engage the community. By galvanizing collective action, the goal is to create a compelling narrative that prompts change and encourages widespread participation. As will be discussed in later sections, many political party representatives, including those from the ruling party, appeared to support the teachers' struggle and stated that they would support them in the Parliamentary Commission. However, the Ministry responded with a harsher and more intransigent attitude, refusing to consider the teachers' demands as realistic and making efforts to avoid engaging with them.

Upon this, hundreds of teachers from all over Turkey gathered at Güvenpark in Ankara on May 26 to hold a demonstrations in front of the Ministry of National Education and wanted to march towards the Ministry. On that day, hundreds of teachers were present in Ankara as a result of all the actions and organizational efforts since the union was founded in 2021. Teacher Semiha recounts:

"The parade looked incredibly huge. Everyone stared in awe, and there was no end to the line. We wanted to walk from Güvenpark to MEB"

Teachers who encountered a police barrier in front of the Ministry of Education building broke through the barricade as a result of their struggle and marched to Parliament Park, where they read their press release and

⁵⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cv22k3mnyj00>

⁵⁵ Blanc, *We Are the Union: How Worker-to-Worker Organizing Is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big*, 190.

announced that they would remain on sit-in there throughout the ÖMK negotiations, beginning a sit-in that would last a total of 53 days.

The sit-ins were held simultaneously in Ankara's Parliament Park, in front of the Provincial Directorate of National Education in Istanbul, and in other provinces, either in front of the Directorates of National Education or in one of the city squares. As the academic year had not yet ended, teachers began their sit-ins after school hours. During the last two weeks of the sit-ins, which lasted from May 26 to July 17, 2024, the sit-ins in the provinces ended, and the sit-in process was concentrated in Ankara. Teachers who had been holding sit-ins in the provinces were asked to come to Ankara on a rotating basis.

The sit-in was long and arduous. From May 26 to July 17, 2024, sit-ins were held and various actions were carried out in all provinces. Teacher Fikret summarizes the actions taken during the sit-in in Ankara as follows:

"Since May 26, we've probably done more actions in a single month than any union could manage. We hung a banner in front of the Ministry of Education, another one on Ankara Castle — those things really boosted our visibility. We held countless actions in front of the Ministry: press statements, sit-ins. The day we did our sit-in, the police detained us with force after six and a half hours. Then, on the 39th day, when we announced we'd be holding another sit-in there, they detained us again — but this time in just 40–45 minutes.

Their attitude, though, was completely different. They started saying, 'We know about your problems now. And since we're the officers assigned to you, we've been following this process as closely as you have.' Before, they couldn't even picture us as teachers. Their mindset was, 'Teachers don't do protests.' But once they learned we were working for minimum wage and teaching for 10, sometimes nearly 12 hours a day, even they started to feel, in their own way, a bit of sympathy toward us."

During this long and arduous sit-in, the union failed to mobilize a sufficient number of teachers and distribute the sit-in burden equally among its members. Teachers who attended demonstrations were unable to

support a daily, regular sit-in that extended beyond work. In this sense, perhaps the most mobilizing form of action was carried out with the smallest number of staff, resulting in staff exhaustion and teacher fatigue.

Despite this exhaustion, the sit-in advanced the teachers' struggle in two ways. First, it informed the public about the injustices suffered by private sector teachers and their demands. However, this public awareness campaign could have been achieved through many other actions. The more important effect of the sit-in was that it forced those responsible for meeting the demands to take action. Teachers' daily presence in Parliament Park and city squares, along with their weekly protests, prompted MEB bureaucrats, all political parties, and the government to take action. Ecre describes this impact as follows:

"The sit-in wasn't so much about public exposure — it was about putting pressure on Parliament. Inside, those MPs and bureaucrats really had to take a step. At some point, the sit-in's impact on public opinion started to fade, but inside Parliament, the debates remained alive. Because we'd said, 'We're not leaving until we get a result.' And there we were, sitting in the Parliament Park.

Normally, there's no way a group could sit in Parliament Park for 52 days straight — that's never happened in Ankara's history. At the time, the animal rights law was also on the agenda, and in the last 10 days, animal rights activists joined us in the sit-in. When they came in, they said to the police, 'Hey, the teachers are in there — why can't we go in? Guess it's not actually a restricted area.'

After that, Eğitim-İş joined our sit-in, and then Eğitim-Sen joined too. And once that happened, they couldn't really stop it anymore. That's actually why they swept us out in the end. They said, 'You've opened up this space and made it legitimate. Now other groups are coming in, so we're not letting you stay here any longer.'"

While the location chosen for the sit-in opened up the government's forbidden spaces, indicating concrete, physical progress, the struggle itself also led to abstract progress: those involved were taking responsibility, and steps were being taken. The sit-in process was meant to pave the way for these steps and the diplomatic processes that would follow them.

4.2.8 Diplomacy

"We got a lot of criticism for this. Friends I'd personally recruited as members, as well as friends who weren't teachers or weren't even in the union, came with similar complaints. It was talked about a lot in the union's WhatsApp groups, too. Things like, 'They're stringing the union along, it's just a tactic. The union shouldn't get dragged into this!'"

Teacher Ecre summarized the criticism directed at the union for entering into the sit-in process and prolonging it in this way, but she did not agree with this criticism. According to those who made this criticism, the meetings held with the parties during the sit-in were essentially intended to stall the union. Indeed, at the end of the sit-in process, the ÖMK did not come to the Assembly, the commission was dissolved, and the discussion of the law was postponed to a later date. In this respect, the critics seemed to be right, as the union had exhausted its staff for 53 days for a cause that yielded no results. The source of these criticisms was the belief that the negotiations with the parties and the ministry signaled a departure from the union's militant activism. However, there was no rupture between the diplomatic processes and these militant actions, but rather a continuity.

Workplace-specific exposures, whether through social media activism, demonstrations, or school raids, were one step. Then, general demonstrations shifted the gears. Just as workplace-specific actions exposed school administrations, general actions exposed the Ministry, the entire sector, and the state of the legislation. With all these exposures, the state bureaucracy, political parties, employer associations, and the entire political elite were forced to engage with the union. This paved the way for diplomacy. The sit-in that began with this accumulation also symbolized the beginning of the diplomatic process in Parliament. Accordingly, if these workplace-specific and general militant actions, that is, all these exposures, had not been carried out, and if public support and bargaining

power had not been gained through these actions, the path to diplomacy would not have been opened. If the sit-in had begun without this bargaining power, these criticisms would have been justified. However, the opposite was true. Accordingly, the diplomatic process was a result of militant actions and the public support accumulated through these actions, that is, the power of the union, and it was a continuation of this power, a continuity. It was not a movement independent of it, contrary to it.

Teachers' diplomacy efforts are similar to the tactic of leveraging elected officials' support⁵⁶, a common practice in worker-to-worker union organizations. While this method aims to raise awareness of rights violations in specific workplaces and to exert political pressure on the company in question, it is also critical for achieving sector-wide demands, especially those requiring legislative action.

There were two sides to the diplomatic process: the ministry and the parliament. On the parliamentary side, the union tried to get all the parties in parliament to agree to include the base salary in the Education Commission that was being set up. And they did it. The union did not just talk to left-wing parties or the opposition, who were into union struggles. This is because the union strives to represent a very broad social base (there were hundreds of thousands of private sector teachers, so there were people of all political persuasions among them) and did not want to allow the government to marginalize and sideline it. The union's move was supported by its members and also facilitated its negotiations with all political parties. In fact, during the diplomatic talks held during the sit-in and the union's participation in the parliamentary commission, the Saadet Party, an Islamist opposition party, was among the parties that provided the most support to the union. Contacts with center-left and left-wing parties such as the CHP TİP, and DEM were mostly established through private talks and meetings with union officials.

On the other hand, the relationship between the ruling AKP party and the union in the parliamentary context was also positive. The chair of the Education Committee, where proposals to amend the law would be

⁵⁶ Ibid., 181.

discussed, was an MP from AKP who had known the unionized teachers since his time as minister and had followed their struggle. He had sent several positive messages to the union indicating that the committee would pass a regulation that would please the teachers. Indeed, he also presented a warm-hearted profile in his meetings with the union. However, when the committee's meetings ended and the evaluation of the ÖMK was postponed, this MP's role also changed.

The strategy developed by the ruling party AKP regarding social problems brought before the Parliament was based on demonstrating that the problems were solved by the AKP's proposals. For example, if a proposal to solve the minimum wage problem came from the opposition, it was rejected by AKP MPs in the General Assembly or relevant committees. Then, after making the necessary revisions in the context of the party's interests, a similar proposal was made by the AKP group and put to a vote, this time being accepted. If the proposal was contrary to the party's general program and interests, such a proposal might not be made. They used this method, especially when the demands of broad social groups were at stake, to create the image that "the solutions to the problems come from the AKP." The teachers' demand for a base salary was also evaluated in this context. The fact that the solution to this problem, which affected hundreds of thousands of private sector teachers, came from the AKP was of vital importance. The union considered the final resolution of the problem more important than who resolved it, and did not care that the AKP was taking credit for it, as they believed their struggle was clear and that the passage of this law would be credited to them in any case. The chairman of the aforementioned Education Commission, AKP MP, sought to ease tensions with the party headquarters by attributing the resolution of this problem to the AKP and to mend fences with the party by resolving the issue on its behalf. However, he was stopped by another faction within the AKP.

Unlike the parliamentary negotiations, the diplomatic negotiations at the ministry level were quite intense. Ministry bureaucrats, deputy ministers, and the minister himself, along with some AKP strategists and MPs, were dissatisfied with the demand for a base salary and the growing

struggle. In particular, a faction within the AKP had taken over educational institutions left vacant after the purge following the Gülenist coup attempt in 2016, turning the education sector into one of their sources of income. For this reason, this faction and the bureaucrats and MPs representing it were involved in every regulation concerning private educational institutions, ensuring that the measures taken did not work against their interests. Within the scope of the base salary demand, representatives of this patron faction obstructed the process through the Ministry, and these bureaucrats were responsible for the negative outcome of the union's negotiations with the Ministry.

§ 4.3 Conclusion

This chapter began by outlining the historical trajectory of privatization in education and showing how neoliberal reforms generated an increasingly precarious sector. It then examined the working conditions of private school teachers, marked by low wages, legal ambiguity, insecure contracts, and systematic rights violations. Against this backdrop, I detailed the PSTU founding process, organizational dynamics, and repertoire of action, including struggles such as the MDC Schools campaign, legal support days, school raids, press statements, and social media-based organizing. Throughout, I analyzed these practices through Hyman's⁵⁷ strategic orientation framework and Blanc's⁵⁸ worker-to-worker model.

PSTU's experience vividly illustrates the reciprocal relationship between sectoral precarity and union strategies. Structural conditions constrained teachers but also compelled the union to develop innovative practices that in turn reshaped sectoral norms—for instance, addressing legal ambiguity through collective legal counseling, or redefining holidays through de facto legitimate school raids. These strategies

⁵⁷ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

⁵⁸ Blanc, *We Are the Union: How Worker-to-Worker Organizing Is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big*.

demonstrate how the sector's features and the union's responses continuously shaped one another.

At the same time, the chapter highlighted the dual character of PSTU's activism. Its tactics—peer-to-peer legal counseling, disruptive raids, and networked social media mobilization—were highly innovative and enabled rapid membership growth and public visibility. Yet these gains coexisted with profound vulnerabilities: structural exclusion from collective bargaining due to authorization thresholds, financial fragility rooted in voluntary contributions, and exposure to repression. PSTU thus shows how organizational creativity in precarious sectors often emerges as a survival mechanism, but remains limited by external constraints and internal imbalances between active and inactive members.

Theoretically, PSTU's trajectory reflects Hyman's⁵⁹ class pole orientation, as teachers articulated irreconcilable conflicts with employers and the state. PSTU's grassroots expansion drew on dynamics central to Blanc's worker-to-worker model: lateral recruitment, mentoring, and diffusion of tactics across schools without reliance on bureaucratic staff structures. Organic leaders emerged in each school, not through formal titles but through trust built on shared grievances. These individuals initiated one-on-one conversations, formed informal chat groups, and gradually connected local efforts into a coherent network. As in Blanc's⁶⁰ accounts of U.S. teacher and service sector workers strikes, these leaders were often not senior staff or union professionals, but young, politicized teachers who turned precariousness into a mobilizing force. Local councils and decentralized representation, combined with centralized coordination from a militant minority, further illustrate how bottom-up practices were institutionalized in the Turkish context.

In sum, PSTU demonstrates that worker-to-worker, independent, grassroots-driven, and creative union practices are both possible and effective under neoliberal authoritarian conditions. Its trajectory underscores how sectoral precarity and union strategies shape one another,

⁵⁹ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

⁶⁰ Blanc, *Red State Revolt: The Teachers' Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics*; Blanc, *We Are the Union: How Worker-to-Worker Organizing Is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big*.

producing both innovation and fragility. This case not only enriches our understanding of combative unionism in Turkey but also foreshadows the broader comparative discussion in the next chapter, where I examine how similar dynamics unfold across other precarious sectors.



Transformative Power of Struggle at Three Levels: Individual, Union and the Sector

This chapter examines the transformative power of union struggle at three interrelated levels: (i) at an individual level, i.e. scrutinizing the individual teachers engaged in mobilization, (ii) at the union/organization level, i.e. exploring the organizational trajectory of their union, and (iii) at a sectoral level, i.e. focusing on the structural dynamics of the private education sector in Turkey. While existing scholarship¹ often treats social movements or unions primarily in terms of institutional effectiveness or bargaining outcomes, this chapter foregrounds transformation as both a subjective and structural process building on Fantasia's, Meyer's and Birelma's² works in the literature. At the individual level, it

¹ E. Amenta, *When Movements Matter: The Townsend Plan and the Rise of Social Security* (Princeton University Press, 2006); K.T. Andrews, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: The Mississippi Civil Rights Movement and Its Legacy* (University of Chicago Press, 2004); M.G. Giugni, "Was It Worth the Effort? The Outcomes and Consequences of Social Movements," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24, no. 1 (1998): 371-93; M. Giugni et al., eds., *How social movements matter*, vol. 10 (U of Minnesota Press, 1999).

² R. Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity* (University of California Press, 1988), JSTOR; R. Meyer, *Perpetual Struggle: Sources of Working-Class Identity and Activism in Collective Action* (The University of Michigan, 2008); Birelma, *Ekmek ve Haysiyet Mücadelesi. Günümüz Türkiye'sinde Üç İşçi Hareketinin Etnografisi*.

analyzes how teachers' participation in union struggles altered their self-perceptions, solidarities, and class consciousness, tracing the emergence of new forms of agency through everyday acts of resistance. At the organizational/union level, it explores how the union itself evolved in response to the challenges of growth and governance, strategic dilemmas, and the pressures of bureaucratization, while still retaining a militant ethos. Finally, at the sectoral level, the chapter demonstrates how collective action compelled a partially deregulated private education field to be re-regulated, thereby challenging core features of the neoliberalism.

In developing this analysis, the chapter critically engages with debates on the comparative transformative potential of economic and political mobilizations, drawing especially on Meyer's notion of "perpetual struggle"³ and subsequent critiques by Birelma⁴. Utilizing the binary distinction of Meyer⁵ between political and economic actions (or in terms of my study this distinction occurs as sector-wide campaigns and workplace-based action) the evidence presented here illustrates how both forms of action produced distinctive yet complementary forms of transformation at all three levels. The case of the PSTU thus highlights how union activism not only improves immediate working conditions but also reshapes identities, solidarities, and institutional landscapes, producing a holistic orientation toward a perpetual struggle.

§ 5.1 Individual Level: Subjective Transformation of Unionized Teachers

This section explores how private sector teachers in Turkey, organized under PSTU, experienced subjective transformations through union struggles. Building on Meyer's⁶ distinction between economic and

³ Meyer, *Perpetual Struggle: Sources of Working-Class Identity and Activism in Collective Action*.

⁴ Birelma, *Ekmek ve Haysiyet Mücadelesi. Günümüz Türkiye'sinde Üç İşçi Hareketinin Etnografisi*.

⁵ Meyer, *Perpetual Struggle: Sources of Working-Class Identity and Activism in Collective Action*.

⁶ Ibid.

political actions, the analysis examines whether different forms of struggle generated different transformative outcomes. While Meyer⁷ argued that workplace-centered “economic” mobilizations are less transformative than broader “political” ones, the evidence from PSTU challenges this claim. Teachers’ experiences suggest that workplace-based mobilizations often produced deeper and more radical transformations at individual level, while general mobilizations usually generated wider but shallower transformations. In this sense, the case of PSTU offers a holistic example of perpetual struggle, combining both levels of action in mutually reinforcing ways.

This section will first examine the collective identity formation processes of unionized teachers, then explore their transformations regarding their class positions, and finally explore empowerment processes. Based on all of this, the section will conclude by exploring the transformative nature of economic and political actions.

Studies on the social movements and collective action often assumed that these actions are a reflection of the participants’ preexisting values, beliefs, and consciousness. However, important studies challenging this view demonstrate that collective struggle, far from being a simple outcome, functions as a dynamic of change itself⁸. According to this approach, concepts such as solidarity and consciousness are not ready-made and fixed phenomena, but rather dynamic “projects” that are constantly being redefined and reshaped within the process of collective action⁹.

Meyer¹⁰ explores the concept of transformation by investigating whether individuals cultivate a perpetual struggle orientation. According to Meyer¹¹, this notion of perpetual struggle refers to the perception that conflict and mobilization are continuous. Instead of viewing this ongoing struggle as exhausting and discouraging, individuals embrace it as a

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity*, 10–11.

⁹ Meyer, *Perpetual Struggle: Sources of Working-Class Identity and Activism in Collective Action*.

¹⁰ Ibid., 40–45.

¹¹ Meyer, *Perpetual Struggle: Sources of Working-Class Identity and Activism in Collective Action*.

source of pride and motivation. The more individuals embrace the concept of perpetual struggle, the stronger their awareness of class struggle becomes. According to her, economic actions which aim to achieve short-term, tangible gains (e.g., better wages or working conditions) are less likely to produce perpetual struggle orientation compared to political actions, focusing on long-term, ideological, or systemic changes. Thus, she argues that economic mobilizations have less transformative impact on workers than political ones¹².

Birelma's¹³ work adds new depth to this discussion. Criticizing Meyer's findings, Birelma demonstrates that successful workplace-based worker mobilization can also transform workers. He demonstrates that some workers become leading, passionate worker activists, but this transformative power is intertwined with risks, such as challenges posed by individual interests or leaders' desires to establish power. Birelma also questions the accuracy of this binary classification, pointing out that while one of the workplace-based mobilizations he studied resembles Meyer's economic action, but its subjective consequences are similar to political action.

Meyer also describes collective efficacy as a fundamental aspect of perpetual struggle, which empowers workers to recognize their collective strength in pursuing their demands¹⁴. This realization often arises during acts of collective action, therefore makes activists feel empowered and united.

Meyer's findings suggest that the class consciousness of participants in the struggle is not an allegiance to a specific political platform or ideology, but rather a commitment to a sustained struggle against labor and living conditions. The consciousness is based on the solidarity of workers and adopts an action-oriented approach that directly responds to the needs in "here and now," rather than a detailed vision of the future. Meyer

¹² Meyer, *Perpetual Struggle: Sources of Working-Class Identity and Activism in Collective Action*.

¹³ Birelma, *Ekmek ve Haysiyet Mücadelesi. Günümüz Türkiye'sinde Üç İşçi Hareketinin Etnografisi*, 327–33.

¹⁴ Meyer, *Perpetual Struggle: Sources of Working-Class Identity and Activism in Collective Action*, 134–35.

calls this type of working-class consciousness "class struggle consciousness,"¹⁵ as it derives from the immediate struggle rather than from general theoretical components and the imagination of an alternative future.

Meyer's study has been subject to methodological criticism. Specifically, it has been argued that comparing the transformative effects of a years-long political campaign involving hundreds of participants to a three-day strike involving sixty participants may have led to an unfair assessment of the subjective transformations experienced by striking workers. Furthermore, the study's reliance solely on interviews raises questions about its ability to accurately reflect the attitudes displayed by participants in their actions¹⁶.

The moral dimension of the struggle and the belief that it is being waged against an injustice influence subjective transformations by increasing emotional intensity¹⁷. Believing that the struggle is moral and legitimate; furthermore, defining the struggle as not limited to the interests of the strugglers but also as a struggle pursued for others, and partially realizing this claim through sacrifices, primarily influences emotional intensity and, therefore, subjective transformations.

5.1.1 *Formation of Collective Identity, Solidarity and Collective Efficacy*

When PSTU was first established, private sector teachers lacked a widespread professional solidarity network; in this sense, they were atomized. Teachers working in numerous geographically and administratively dispersed institutions lacked a platform to voice their common concerns. With the organization of PSTU, teachers began to come together and discuss their problems. This gradually led to the formation of a collective identity.

¹⁵ Ibid., 187.

¹⁶ Birelma, *Ekmek ve Haysiyet Mücadelesi. Günümüz Türkiye'sinde Üç İşçi Hareketinin Etnografisi*, 329.

¹⁷ Ibid., 333.

As described by Polletta & Jasper¹⁸, collective identity encompasses both imagined and concrete communities. It involves a process of perception and construction, as well as the discovery of preexisting bonds, interests, and boundaries. This concept provides individuals with the categories needed to navigate and make sense of the social world. Consequently, social movements generate new identities to gain power and transform individual selves, leveraging the ability of organizers to redefine existing identities and create new ones amidst various pressures¹⁹. As a result, participation in these movements often reshapes activists' biographies, leaving a lasting impact on their personal identities even after the movement concludes, regardless of whether this transformation is an explicit goal.

This is precisely the case at PSTU. During the struggle, teachers developed a new collective identity. This collective identity derived from solidarity. In other words, private sector teachers had not embraced a pre-existing identity. They established this identity, the identity of private sector teachers, through their own activism and in the process of self-organization.

Previously, private sector teachers simply called themselves teachers, imagining themselves within a very broad cluster, a shared cluster with a large segment of public sector teachers who had experiences that conflicted with their own daily work experiences. The phrase "private sector" at the beginning of the union's name gradually became a characteristic that unionized teachers both accepted and distinguished themselves from public teachers. Teachers who unionized, those who participated in the union, received legal support from it, saw other colleagues seeking legal support, organized protests at their own schools, participated in protests at others' schools, participated in public demonstrations and sit-ins—in short, all teachers who simply inhaled the union's atmosphere—all exhibited a sense of separation from public sector teachers and embraced the collective identity of private sector teachers.

¹⁸ Francesca Polletta and James M. Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements," *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 283–305, JSTOR.

¹⁹ Ibid.

"But when you look at the conditions, we're not treated like teachers at all. In Turkey, society places an incredible value on teachers — because everyone has some connection to school, to being a student, and the teacher is always at the center of that relationship. So, in the public eye, teachers get enormous respect. But in private institutions, that respect is completely gone." (Fikret)

This collective identity consisted of both positive and negative qualities. The negative qualities were closely related to working conditions in the private sector. Private sector teachers often developed a sense of unity and belonging, akin to a shared destiny, based on the oppression they faced, the injustices they suffered, the low wages, forced labor, long working hours, and the poor conditions prevalent in the sectors.

On the other hand, the positive qualities of this collective identity were based on two foundations: the teaching profession itself, and the positive feelings fostered by solidarity. Teachers believed that teaching in Turkey held symbolic meanings such as selflessness, intellectuality, and the possession of a significant social role. Families and the entire society entrusted their children to teachers—to them. Whether working in the public or private sector, this trust was never to be betrayed. Regardless of the circumstances, upholding the best interests of children in the best possible way was a source of pride for the teaching profession. In this sense, teachers constructed their collective identity around themes such as diligence and fulfilling social obligations.

However, solidarity was a component of unionized teachers' collective identity that was at least as important as their profession's social role. Suffering from the same problems and struggling against them nourished their solidarity, and their solidarity reinforced their collective identity. The process of forming a collective identity revealed the courage of teachers to take a stand against the injustices they were exposed to. School raids, school-front demonstrations, and general actions were motivated by the following sentiment: "We must all do something for one another."

"It absolutely feels like a responsibility. Because as someone inside this profession, I can't just stand by — I have to step in. I'm living

through these problems myself. And the close friends I've made in this job are going through the same thing. Maybe we're all giving our whole lives to this work. But when it comes to actually getting what we deserve in return, it's shockingly little. ... And as a part of this profession, I feel like I have to do something about it. I have to step in. The teacher next to me has to step in. We have to come together somehow and fix this rotten system in the profession. And when I see other teachers who realized all this before I did — teachers who also feel, "We can't stay silent, we have to raise our voices" — then my belief that we really can change this broken system gets even stronger." (Fikret)

Teacher solidarity, in Meyer's words, fostered "collective efficacy"²⁰. Teachers who achieved gains in certain schools and across the sector through demonstrations and actions often spoke of the power and efficacy that came from being together. Contrary to Meyer's claim, this collective efficacy in PSTU did not differ in terms of action type; it was similar or equal between political (or general) actions and economic (or workplace-based) actions. I argue that this is because in both types of action, teachers' feelings and courage about what they would gain were strengthened. In school actions, teachers achieved concrete gains, while in general actions, they felt they had the support of public opinion behind them and they're close to sector-wide gains.

For example, while Dilek was talking about the trust teachers felt during the school raids, she also mentioned the sense of efficacy created by winning against bosses who exploited them:

"...there are people who stood up to the employers that exploited and oppressed them — the ones who humiliated them, put them in tough situations. The union was basically their voice, a sign of what they themselves couldn't do. People suddenly felt this huge sense of trust, and after those school raids, union memberships shot up like crazy."

²⁰ Meyer, *Perpetual Struggle: Sources of Working-Class Identity and Activism in Collective Action*, 134.

On the other hand, while discussing the demonstrations, sit-ins and diplomatic activities in the parliament, Ecre was clearly talking about efficacy:

"For example, after we were detained during the TÖZÖK protest, the employers' associations had to make a statement. They said, 'We also want to resolve this issue. But the cost is too high—let's find some middle ground.'" Now, in a situation where even the employers' associations are saying such things, the bureaucrats can't just turn their backs on us. In a way, we exhaust certain paths and methods, but at the same time, so do they. If they hadn't made promises to us during last year's protests (the sit-in in front of the parliament), they wouldn't have been forced to meet with us this time around. Nor would they have even considered convening the education commission.

This year, I really feel hopeful. I keep saying to myself, 'We're going to make this happen.' Because they're truly cornered now. The employers' associations are already convinced. They realize what's going on—constant protests, constant damage to their brand value, constant public exposure. It all counts against them."

However, it's worth noting that, as a result of the 53-day Great Teachers' Sit-in, some setbacks began to emerge regarding this collective efficacy. The sit-in's lengthy duration, its excessive exhaustion of the union's militant cadres, and its failure to ultimately yield gains raised questions among teachers about the power of their struggle. In a conversation with teacher Necip, I asked him whether the sit-in and the diplomatic activities during this period had increased commitment to the union and the struggle, and he responded as follows:

"Turkish people care a lot about results. Since the base salary law didn't pass, things went backwards. I think we just have to accept that."

Still, some of the unionized teachers felt that as their struggle continued, the government's capacity to take action diminished, and they felt they were cornering the government. They reassured themselves that they should not be discouraged by not being able to quickly win a major demand like a base salary, something that would obviously take years to

achieve. As quoted from Ecre above, they were hopeful, they believed they're going to make it happen.

5.1.2 *Class Positionality and Developing Consciousness*

The collective identity of private sector teachers also had a class dimension. Unionized private sector teachers often positioned themselves within the employer-employee relationship, viewing not only workplace relationships but also, for example, political developments (like power changes in the ministry) that affected them from this perspective. They acknowledged, as teacher Dilek put it, that they were "ultimately workers."

In his exploration of class consciousness, Michael Mann²¹ outlines four primary sequential elements: (i) "class identity," where workers perceive themselves as members of the working class; (ii) "class opposition," where they identify capitalists as adversaries; (iii) "class totality," which involves recognizing that class shapes all of society; and (iv) a vision for an alternative societal structure. While Mann's sequential framework appears to be empirically flawed by presuming that individual subjective experiences will evolve in this specific order, as well as theoretically flawed by suggesting that these stages must occur one after another²², it is not an entirely impractical approach.

Most teachers who were actively organized in the union, that is, who took care to participate in activities and actions, saw themselves as part of the working class and had developed a class identity in this sense. More accurately, this class position was part of the collective identity they had developed, but it was not the most prominent feature of that identity. In this sense, they never saw themselves as "just any worker": they had the idea that they were not proletarians because of their level of education, their wages, and their cultural level.

²¹ M. Mann, *Consciousness and Action among the Western Working Class* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1973).

²² Fatma Betül Kocaaslan Doğan, "Between Empowerment and Disappointment: Women Workers' Struggle for Unionization in 2020s Turkey" (Unpublished MA Dissertation, Bogazici University, 2024).

"It's like they don't treat you as a teacher at all, but as if you're completely unskilled — like a factory worker just tightening screws. And of course, I don't mean to look down on that kind of work. But at the end of the day, what we do is teaching. It's a profession that really touches people's lives. Yet new teachers are treated as if they have no qualifications at all. Especially in the eyes of the bosses." (Fikret)

When I asked them why they embraced this class identity, why they saw themselves as workers, and observed them, I realized that the origin of this identity stemmed from practical and concrete reasons. Just as solidarity, which is a concrete practice, produces a collective identity, class identity was also formed as a result of concrete class opposition experiences. Teachers often said that they were unaware of their class position before their first experience of struggle. Until they encountered the union, they did not attribute a class position to themselves. The class position they attributed to themselves enabled them to interpret all the mistreatment they were subjected to from a different perspective: the school administration was exploiting teachers for profit, and they were not alone in this. All teachers, and indeed all workers, were subjected to exploitation in this way. In short, to the extent that they experienced class opposition, they attributed this collective class identity to themselves.

The general actions carried out by teachers for their general demands, that is, the union's campaigns covering sectoral demands, were the element that linked class opposition with class totality. In these general actions, teachers demanded their rights as workers from employers, preferring a propaganda language based entirely on class opposition, while also using slogans that implied that these employers were widespread throughout society and politics. For example, one of the banners used during the Great Sit-in of Teachers, "Yusuf Tekin, Minister of Employers" (referring to the Minister of Education), demonstrated the presence of class totality among unionized teachers.

Finally, it is important to note that the vision of an alternative society is largely absent outside the union's founding members, who currently serve at various levels, from passive membership to the Central Executive Committee (MYK). While some militant, left-leaning teachers advocate

for the complete publicization of education as their own and the union's vision, most unionized teachers I spoke with advocated for the union's vision to achieve the maximum equality of working conditions in private educational institutions with those in public institutions. In this respect, most of the teachers did not envision an alternative societal order that would not involve their exploitation in the private education sector.

The situation of teachers aligns well with the “class struggle consciousness” as conceptualized by Meyer²³. This form of consciousness is characterized not by ideological or theoretical frameworks, but by several key qualities: a commitment to enhancing living and working conditions through solidarity, a focus on the needs of the working class, and an acknowledgment of the persistent challenges posed by power dynamics within the socioeconomic structure. It also anticipates ongoing conflicts with elites, reinforces belief in collective strength, and prioritizes immediate struggles to address urgent worker needs, rather than concentrating on a specific future vision.

One important aspect to emphasize regarding teachers' consciousness of class struggle is its ability to foster empathy and awareness for other social issues. Non-leftist unionized teachers often showed reluctance to engage in discussions about matters pertinent to the education sector, such as the right of Kurds to receive education in their native language, even within the context of their union. Some of them were upset about the discussion itself. In this regard, the PSTU fell short in promoting awareness and empathy for these intersectional struggles. Additionally, as mentioned in Chapter 4, many individuals at the core of the PSTU were already opposed to this intersectional approach, which, according to them, is social movement unionism, which contributed to the reluctance to address such issues.

While some leftist teachers within the union appreciated the class struggle consciousness among their peers, others felt that a theoretical and ideological shortcoming was hindering the union's progress. Those

²³ Meyer, *Perpetual Struggle: Sources of Working-Class Identity and Activism in Collective Action*, 189.

teachers who lacked the alternative vision of society described in Mann's²⁴ four-stage analysis often were the same ones who were not socialists. These individuals also exhibited the class struggle consciousness outlined by Meyer²⁵. Thus, essentially, this differentiation lay between those who were ideologically leftist and those who were not. Teacher Utku contended that non-leftist teachers "prevented a common understanding" in the union's decision-making processes. He attributed this obstacle to the deficiency in union education. In his view, the class consciousness, determination to fight, and political perspectives among unionized teachers were not unified. While many unionized teachers regarded this diversity as a strength and an indicator of inclusiveness, Utku analyzed the matter from a contrasting viewpoint:

"What union education really brings is a kind of union consciousness — and at the same time, class consciousness. Now, when you look at things on the level of representatives, not everyone is on the same page class-wise. But in the end, there has to be some unity. We need to function as if we're one mind.

The decision-making process is democratic — it comes down to the majority. But of course, there are always some people who think differently. And that can affect how much they participate in actions later on, or whether their involvement starts to fade.

But once class consciousness really takes hold, once union consciousness is fully in place, then the union acts with one mind. And that increases the chances of not just taking action, but actually winning something from it. At some point, the "head" has to be able to carry the body. And yes, we do feel the lack of that sometimes."

Utku was right: union training was virtually nonexistent within the teachers' union. Rather than developing a separate curriculum, the union seemed to hope that everyone would learn from action and the process. Furthermore, according to Utku, the lack of training created three fundamental problems: the inability to produce new organizers for organizing

²⁴ Mann, *Consciousness and Action among the Western Working Class*.

²⁵ Meyer, *Perpetual Struggle: Sources of Working-Class Identity and Activism in Collective Action*.

in schools, the inability to adequately mobilize the grassroots, and the decline in the effectiveness of decision-making mechanisms. Again, Utku was right, the difference between non-leftist and leftist teachers became a problem in the General Assembly (see 5.2.2 Structural Transformation).

5.1.3 *Empowerment and Formation of Individual Agency*

During my time at the union, I repeatedly witnessed a pattern: teachers who came to the union to consult about legal issues felt both fear and anger. They were afraid that their exploitative bosses would further violate their rights, that they would lose their jobs, and that they would not be able to make ends meet. They were angry for the same reasons. Their anger was primarily directed at their employers. However, this anger sometimes extended to the ministry, state policies, and state officials.

The response they received from the union, which they turned to in anger and fear, often renewed their self-confidence. Knowing that the union was behind them and experiencing this firsthand, as well as having patient and attentive unionized teachers who explained them step by step what to say to the abusive principal at school, gave the teachers strength.

One day, when I was on my voluntary work at the union, a teacher named Murat came to the union for legal support. The principal at Murat's school had, as is typical, made Murat sign a drawer contract. Murat thought he would work for 12 months and take paid leave during the summer vacation. However, the principal wanted him to sign a resignation letter. When Murat refused to sign, the principal began delaying his salary payments, attending his classes to pressure him, putting him in a difficult position in front of the students, and even insulting him to damage his dignity. After the academic year ended, the director called Murat in for overtime, telling him that various documents needed to be completed. All of this was done to force Murat to resign, thereby avoiding the obligation to pay him two months' salary. When Murat, feeling terrified and overwhelmed, turned to the union for help, he felt completely alone.

Oğuz, in his role at the union, took care of such matters before involving lawyers. If the issue could be resolved, he would try to resolve it on behalf of the union by contacting the school directly. Many school administrations had heard of the union's reputation, so they tried to be cautious when the union contacted them. When Oğuz called, this principal spoke very positively, denying the mobbing Murat teacher claimed to have been subjected to, assuring him that he did not want him to resign and that his summer salary would be paid. It had become routine for the union to call school administrations and resolve the problems of victimized teachers with a single phone call. But sometimes, as was the case with this school, administrations did not keep their promises to the union.

After Oğuz's meeting, the pressure Murat encountered at school did not decrease; on the contrary, it increased significantly. The week after the phone call, during graduation week, the school principal summoned Murat to his office and verbally abused him. Since the principal felt threatened when the union called him, he then threatened Murat with beating and firing him. Despite his promise to the union, the principal increased the pressure on the teacher, leaving Murat unsure of what to do, so he turned to the union again.

Even though a few days had passed since the incident, talking about it still made Murat seriously nervous. He had come to Istanbul two years ago to work and did not know many people here. This meant that he had no close circle of friends to lean on, either financially or emotionally. He was at a loss as to what to do in this situation. He was being threatened for the first time, and he could not comprehend how a principal could behave this way toward a teacher. His shock and fear were evident in his eyes. At the union, he first met with Oğuz and then with volunteer lawyers. As he learned what could be done in this situation and as Oğuz and the other unionized teachers showed their support, he began to feel better. He thanked them many times and expressed his gratitude. More importantly, he said that he had overcome the fear he had felt in the face of the principal's threat that day and that he could not shake off its effect, and that he felt a higher level of trust now.

As his fear subsided, Murat's anger grew. After we (Murat, Oğuz, volunteer lawyer and I) discussed the process of leaving the school (he would have to go to school for a week and then use his paid vacation entitlement until the end of his contract) and the roadmap for the lawsuit he would file against the principal, he seemed more determined, at least everything was clearer in his mind. Murat had expressed his feelings, saying, "I feel at ease when I come here, teacher. Talking to you gives me strength against that despicable man."

Murat became a member of the union during this period. Although he attended some events, he never participated in any protests. He was mostly quiet, trying to solve his own problem, expecting solidarity and showing solidarity. He was not a militant, but he realized the importance of solidarity. He consulted with Oğuz and the lawyers and implemented the strategy they devised. Two weeks after joining the union, he left the school having received all his payments. The lawsuit he filed against the principal is still ongoing.

Without the union's support, it would not have been possible for Murat to turn his problem with the principal into a lawsuit and leave the school with his rights intact. Here, the union had two fundamental effects. It affected both the school and Murat. It affected the school because, as I mentioned in the third section, the use of exposing mechanisms meant that schools had to take the union's warnings seriously and act in accordance with them. In other words, the union intimidated school administrations. On the other hand, the union affected Murat in the opposite way: it empowered him and gave him courage. Murat, who had been afraid of the principal who had threatened him the previous week, was able to confront him the following week and secure his rights.

I will discuss the permanence of this transformation of individuals by recounting a similar incident. The founding director of MOL Schools was a manager who harassed female teachers and implemented widespread rights violations in the sector within his institution. Several unionized teachers had previously worked at this school and had either resigned or been dismissed, suffering all kinds of violations, from harassment to other forms of abuse. However, no one had previously approached the

union while working at MOL schools, until one of the women teachers did so. This teacher was harassed by the institution's director while working there. In addition to harassment, she was also dealing with other common issues in the sector, such as mobbing, low wages, and late payment of wages. However, the harassment was the final straw, and the teacher approached the union. The matter was discussed thoroughly, lawyers were consulted, and it was decided to pursue legal action and expose the institution. Following this decision, the MOL schools exposure campaign described in Chapter 4 was carried out.

This teacher played an active role in organizing the protest. However, this process has not been easy for her. At times, she had reservations about the details to be included in the press release, for example. She had concerns about confidentiality, protecting herself, and not jeopardizing the court proceedings. In addition, she was understandably afraid of facing her abusive boss again, encountering his threats once more, and even suffering physical harm. Unionized teachers did their utmost to support the teacher, striving to ensure and protect her safety. The victimized teacher drew strength from this support and solidarity throughout the process and took the lead in organizing the action. She did not participate physically in the action, as the union deemed it necessary for her safety. However, she continued to participate in other activities, maintaining her presence within the union.

The moral dimension and the belief that the struggle is being pursued against an injustice play a major role in these empowerment processes²⁶. Resistance against injustice and a sense of righteousness and morality increased the emotional intensity of the individuals involved in the struggle. This sense of righteousness was accompanied by determination when taking action and happiness and satisfaction upon returning from the action. Believing that the struggle is morally right and legitimate, in other words, emphasizing that it is being waged against an injustice; furthermore, defining the struggle as not limited to the interests of the

²⁶ Birelma, *Ekmek ve Haysiyet Mücadelesi. Günümüz Türkiye'si'nde Üç İşçi Hareketinin Etnografisi*, 333.

strugglers but also as a struggle undertaken for others, and partially realizing this claim through sacrifices, primarily influences emotional intensity and, therefore, subjective transformations.

When I asked Dilek teacher what enabled her to carry out these actions, what instilled this courage in her, she replied:

"The trust we get from each other. That's what it is — courage, trust, and knowing we're right. And you know, it's because you are right that you find the courage to keep going."

5.1.4. Comparing Economic and Political Mobilizations

After leading workplace actions, as we have seen before in cases like Ecre and Necip, becoming an active union member was the most common scenario. Almost everyone I met at the union had organized and resisted at a school and joined the union during or after this resistance. In other words, they had become active members of the union as a result of workplace-based action. In this sense, they had undergone a profound transformation and become militant. However, the scope of this militancy was limited: outside of a core group actively involved in school resistance actions, militancy was not a widespread phenomenon. In other words, workplace-based actions had a profound but narrowly focused transformative impact.

On the other hand, the majority of the union's official members joined the union after a general action has taken place in the mainstream media or social media. In other words, by engaging in actions that generated significant interest, more people were reached and unionization increased. School protests were not as popular as public protests, garnering the same amount of coverage in the mainstream media. If we consider joining the union as a transformation, which is evident given the low unionization rates in Turkey, the transformative scope of general actions was broader.

However, this broad impact did not transform teachers sufficiently to become active members. In other words, the fact that the union had 14,000 members but only around 1,000 active members actually showed that the transformative effect was broad but shallow.

When I asked Ufuk, one of the leftist teachers and active members of the union, İstanbul representative, how successful the union was in transforming unionized teachers, he replied as follows:

"Yeah, it worked. But was it a hundred percent success? You can't really say that. Today, the union has 14,000 members, but when we take to the streets, we can't bring out all 14,000. So no, it's not a 100% success. But as much as we've been able to reach people, connect with them, involve them — we've created processes that turn them into leaders, that make them part of this space. Like when we ask, 'Teacher, would you take on this responsibility for the union?' or say, 'The union needs this', a lot of members will say, 'Alright, I'll do it.'"

For example, we went through the Bahçeşehir campaign. We drafted emails in different languages. We shared them in the groups, reached out to teachers, said, 'Here's what we're going to do.' And teachers — even those who weren't from Bahçeşehir — volunteered: 'I'll do the translation.' They took on that work. And remember, these are the same teachers who, just six months earlier, would do whatever the principal said, who weren't even sure if they had any rights. Suddenly they were saying, 'The union is asking something of me, and I can contribute. I can be part of this.' That's how they started standing side by side with the union."

In this sense, my findings contradict those of Meyer. She argued that political mobilizations have a more transformative effect than economic ones because, according to her, political mobilizations, since they have longer-term goals and are based on a more sustained struggle, are more likely to lead to a perpetual struggle orientation than economic actions with short-term, immediate goals.

Workplace-based actions within the teachers' union generally resulted in gains. Exposures and school raids, in particular, both protected the teachers working there and forced employers to back down. In fact, some of the rights violations that teachers eliminated across the sector were achieved not through general actions, but through such workplace-based actions. For example, when other school administrations saw that a school was exposed for not paying overtime wages, they abandoned this

practice so that they would not be exposed themselves. In this respect, teachers developed a high sense of collective efficacy during these actions. Furthermore, as a contributing factor to this sense of efficacy, the rightness and morality of the school actions seemed self-evident, almost unquestionable, to teachers. I claim that the struggle, the perception of that singular action as righteous, just, moral, and legitimate, played a significant role in the transformation experienced by teachers involved in these processes. Teachers loved recounting their experiences of resistance in their own schools. They loved this, and they also loved emphasizing their righteousness.

Conversely, there were almost no material gains in the consequence of political actions, except for the increase in visibility and recruitment of the union. As I mentioned above, the prolonged process exhausted some, while completely dropping others from the process. While these actions may have had greater visibility, in some cases, they even partially damaged the sense of collective efficacy. Ultimately, a 53-day sit-in, in other words, a 53-day effort, was perceived as fruitless by most of the union teachers. Teachers who felt that these efforts were not fruitless and that the government was cornered more were generally those with a higher sense of collective efficacy, closer to the center team of the union and active members.

I argue that since the PSTU organized both types of mobilizations and articulated them into a holistic struggle, they achieved that transformative power. In other words, PSTU fought for long-term, sector-wide demands while also organizing actions addressing immediate needs in schools. In fact, achieving sector-wide gains through actions in schools was precisely the result of this articulation. Teachers who were transformed through workplace-based actions could not sustain their transformations without the union's perpetual struggle.

The subjective transformations of private sector teachers can be summarized along three main axes. First, they developed a collective identity by embracing their distinct position as private sector teachers, separating themselves from the broader teacher community and constructing a sense of belonging through activism. Second, they experienced solidarity

and empowerment: through collective practices they discovered their capacity for collective efficacy, overcoming fear and isolation, and learning that only unity could secure meaningful change. Third, they cultivated a form of class consciousness, increasingly framing their experiences within the employer–employee relationship, identifying themselves as workers, and at times linking workplace exploitation to broader structures of social domination, thereby developing elements of class totality.

The case of PSTU demonstrates the importance of utilizing two mobilization types together to achieve the subjective transformation. While Meyer suggested that economic mobilizations are limited in their transformative potential compared to broader political mobilizations, the experience of private sector teachers showed the opposite. Workplace-based mobilizations—though local and short-term—produced the most profound transformations: teachers who resisted exploitation in their schools often became active members, developed a strong sense of collective identity, and discovered the efficacy of solidarity. These struggles turned fear into courage and isolation into collective agency, anchoring the deepest shifts in teachers’ subjective worlds.

At the same time, general political actions played an equally indispensable role, though in a different register. Large-scale protests and sit-in expanded the reach of the union, brought thousands of new members, and diffused the identity of the “private sector teacher” into the wider public. Yet their transformative impact was largely shallow. While they convinced many to join the union, they rarely achieved to turn members into committed militants. Indeed, the failure to achieve immediate gains in some of these long campaigns even risked undermining collective efficacy. Nevertheless, these actions provided breadth and legitimacy, securing the union’s visibility and embedding the notion of struggle in teachers’ everyday vocabulary.

The union’s real strength, therefore, did not underlie in privileging one type of mobilization over the other but in articulating them into a holistic perpetual struggle. By combining deep individual transformations fostered through workplace confrontations with broad legitimacy generated by general actions, PSTU sustained both the militancy of

its core and the growth of its rank-and-file. In this sense, the union's trajectory highlights how economic and political actions are not separate, but mutually reinforcing dimensions of struggle. Through this articulation, union activism reshaped not only the material conditions of teachers' work but also their collective identities, solidarities, and class consciousness—ultimately transforming both the outer and inner worlds of private sector teachers.

§ 5.2 Union Level: From Social Movement to Established Organization

Since its establishment, the union has maintained a highly dynamic structure. While the process of struggle has transformed teachers on an individual level, it has simultaneously compelled the union to undergo changes in various respects. This section will examine how the union's strategies and organizational structure evolved throughout its relatively short lifespan, from 2021 to mid-2025.

5.2.1 *Strategic Transformation*

As discussed in Chapter 4, when the union was founded, teachers sought to practice unionism along class pole, yet they struggled to articulate precisely what this entailed. What united them was a shared commitment to militancy—a relentless, uncompromising stance toward struggle. However, the specific means and methods remained unclear. The founding cadre primarily drew on past experiences, emulating earlier militant labor actions, with the intention of adapting them to the contemporary context and to the teachers' movement. Teacher Ufuk describes this emulation as follows:

"The strategies we built were actually based on this: we had experiences from the past ... strong worker resistances, factory struggles. The foundation of those factory struggles was this: organizing from below, internal organizing, having a unionized person no one knew about, and

then gradually building up until, at the end of the day, a strike decision was made and the switches were pulled down. That's the way we wanted to organize in schools."

However, Teacher Ufuk noted that this form of struggle was eventually abandoned, as it proved incompatible with the realities of the sector. When the union was first established, the number of teachers who unionized within schools was far lower than anticipated.

"...there, we drew up a general line about how the union would act. But once it was founded, we moved outside that line. The plan was this: we would organize in the schools. But the reality wasn't like that. When we first started, we had hundreds of teachers around us, but only about 70 members. There were so many people we had reached out to—people we encouraged to become members. Still, when we launched, we expected it to explode with excitement, but there were only 70 members. ... People were looking for some kind of guarantee. Yes, we were saying great things, making great promises. But there was no concrete outcome yet. And because the country's history with unions isn't great—people have been fired for unionizing, sometimes even arrested—it had turned into a psychological fear for them.

Here's how we overcame that. We officially established the union in September, and right away we had the November mid-term break ahead of us. We identified the schools that were still holding classes during the break, and that was the first thing we acted on. We immediately started to secure the right to the mid-term holiday. And it developed so fast... because the employers had never faced that kind of pressure before. We called and got schools to stop classes. We sent petitions of complaint to the Ministry of Education. Inspectors went into the schools. They went in for inspections. Because we also pressured the provincial and district education authorities, we won that ground. That's where teachers began to gain confidence. So, in the end, it didn't turn out to be about the union organizing hundreds of people from inside and suddenly shutting everything down with a strike. Instead, it happened in a way we hadn't expected or predicted. That's why what the union had

promised itself at the beginning actually evolved differently—going beyond itself and turning into a real achievement.”

What Teacher Ufuk described reflects the process discussed in the previous section—namely, the renewal and discovery of strategies through trial and error in response to sectoral conditions. This was not limited to the post-foundation period; in fact, at every turning point, the union has made new decisions about what course of action to pursue. This fluid and non-fixed strategic orientation—marked in general by a steadfast commitment to militancy—has become one of the union’s most distinctive features.

5.2.2 *Structural Transformation*

During the course of its struggles, the union shifted from a more flexible and decentralized movement-oriented structure to a slightly more centralized organizational form. However, this transition generated concerns over bureaucratization and stagnation. The emergence of certain indicators of such tendencies prompted discussions among unionized teachers about how to prevent bureaucratic ossification. This section examines these processes of organizational transformation.

From the outset, the teachers’ union adopted a bottom-up, worker-to-worker, and independent approach to unionism. By its very nature, this orientation entailed a reliance on more informal processes in the functioning of organizational bodies. Decisions were taken more spontaneously, meetings were convened without rigid schedules, and the weight of a central executive body was not strongly felt. Yet this structural form proved unsustainable during the initial years of rapid expansion, forcing the union to undergo a transformation. By this point, the union was no longer the small organization founded in August 2021 by a couple of teachers from Istanbul and Ankara. It was now managed and simultaneously managed by a larger number of people, with the unofficial numbers close to 14,000. Numerical growth was accompanied by geographical expansion, as the increase in the number of provincial branches further

necessitated transformation. The union gradually lost the decentralized form it had initially embraced.

Formally, the union's organizational chart had remained unchanged since its establishment. It followed the classical model outlined in the standard statutes prescribed by labor legislation, comprising central decision-making bodies and provincial administrations. Until the transformation, the union operated within this framework only partially, with spontaneity and informality often taking precedence. With expansion, however, greater emphasis was placed on the formal chart. The organizational structures of the central administration and provincial branches were updated. Teachers attempted to balance these by institutionalizing provincial assemblies and the representatives' assembly, thereby ensuring that centralized democracy functioned not only as a ritual at annual congresses but as a process integrated into every decision. Moreover, provincial assemblies, which had previously met irregularly, established regular meeting schedules and began to formalize workflows. Increasingly detailed rules were defined for the functioning of provincial and representatives' assemblies. Thus, the union shifted from a decentralized form to a centralized democratic structure with horizontal decision-making still preserved.

While this transformation was necessary to manage growing numbers, facilitate decision-making within assemblies, and maintain effectiveness, it also provoked fears of stagnation. The concern was that greater proceduralization—intended to ensure efficiency—might undermine dynamism by producing rigidities in decision-making ranks. As an instance, the formalization of procedures meant that members who could no longer devote sufficient time to union work were not easily replaced, leading to inefficiencies. Ceren described one of those inefficiencies as:

"There are 40 people in the provincial assembly. And friends in the assembly are having a debate. They say, for example, we've been carrying out work for a whole term. At the beginning of this term, these 40 people were elected. But around 17–20 of them are nowhere to be seen. So then, there should be some accountability, right? And if that's the

case, why aren't the friends who weren't elected but actually want to work and take part in activities included in this assembly?"

Decisions were being made, processes were being carried out somehow. But the workload of the 40-member council fell on the shoulders of 20 people. A similar problem was also experienced with provincial representatives. According to Ceren, the union's agenda included establishing a democratic mechanism to remove provincial representatives who were not fulfilling their duties properly (some due to workplace-related pressures, others due to no longer showing the same level of commitment to the union) from their positions.

Despite her criticisms, Ceren was one of the supporters of the process of formalization and centralization. She argued that self-regulatory structures should be established to counter such challenges and that unionized teachers could overcome these problems as they gained experience:

"And being able to handle those problems really depends on setting up solid mechanisms and making themselves open to transparent oversight. They're trying to do that, but like I said, they're struggling. The union still needs to get more experience with this and really settle its mechanisms."

Furthermore, it was also interesting that Ceren referenced de-facto legitimate struggle when discussing this issue:

"The union, which recognizes no obstacles when it comes to using de facto-legitimate struggle to create mechanisms that open up space in the sector, also needs to be able to do this: when it sees a problem like this, it should be able to renew its cadres in a democratic way, with methods that everyone can accept and feel good about."

Hence, formalization and centralization were indispensable for sustaining organizational growth and decision-making capacity, but they also risked entrenching inefficiencies and dampening grassroots dynamism. Ceren's reflections underscored that the resolution of such tensions depends not merely on adopting formal procedures but on embedding democratic renewal and accountability into the union's everyday practices. In this sense, the union's ongoing struggle is not simply about

organizational design, but about cultivating the experience, mechanisms, and democratic culture needed to balance efficiency with inclusivity.

The bureaucratization and stagnation also reshaped the union's relationship with its rank and file. The previously fluid and dynamic boundary between leaders and members became more rigid. New teachers joining the union increasingly felt unable to influence decision-making processes. While the established structure helped streamline decisions, it also limited opportunities for active participation in struggles. Notably, the union's initial adoption of the worker-to-worker organizing model was precisely intended to avoid such bureaucratic tendencies and strengthen grassroots mobilization. Yet, as the union underwent structural transformation, a distinction emerged between the cadre and the rank-and-file. Responsibilities were increasingly handled by the cadre, leaving fewer tasks for the broader membership.

Critics within the union often described this tendency as a drift toward "service unionism". They argued that nearly all activities were carried out by the cadre, while insufficient initiative and space were afforded to ordinary members. By "cadre," I refer to those teachers who held positions in provincial offices or the central administration. These were either teachers with leftist ideological leanings and prior organizational experience, or those who had been transformed through the struggle itself and had risen to leadership during earlier, more open periods. These individuals participated in nearly all workplace-based and general actions—or, at a minimum, closely followed the processes. The charge of service unionism stemmed from the perception that rank-and-file teachers increasingly expected the cadre to organize actions on their behalf. For instance, a teacher whose holiday rights were violated in School X might request the union cadre to confront the principal, rather than organizing colleagues and engaging in the struggle directly. In this sense, the union came to be perceived not as a platform for collective struggle but as a service center.

School raids illustrate this dynamic. By their very nature, such actions had to be carried out by the cadre, and for a period, the union did so regularly. Over time, however, teachers began to request raids in place of

organizing themselves. Since the cadre were not professional trade unionists but teachers themselves, the expansion of raids was not feasible. Moreover, it became apparent that increased reliance on raids diminished teachers' own motivation and capacity for organization. In effect, the union was providing a "school raid service," which ultimately led to a decision to discontinue such actions.

Fatigue within the cadre also generated inertia. Some assembly members failed to attend meetings or to participate in the division of tasks, which delayed union activities and concentrated responsibilities on a smaller group of teachers, leading to overload.

The evolution of PSTU, the proceduralization process, reveals a tension central to Hyman's²⁷ strategic triangle: the dilemma between institutional stabilization and militant spontaneity. While these organizational reforms enhanced effectiveness and sustainability, they occasionally moderated the speed of escalation. This reflects a broader contradiction in grassroots unionism, where strategic flexibility must be maintained without replicating bureaucratic inertia.

While my fieldwork was ongoing, teachers considered addressing this problem of stagnation and service unionism by reorganizing the hierarchy on the basis of labor contribution. The idea was to develop a system in which teachers' assumption of union responsibilities would be proportional to the effort they invested in union tasks, thereby reactivating grassroots participation.

Alongside these organizational debates, another issue emerged as the union grew. Initially, the union functioned as a modest solidarity network, in which private school teachers discussed the problems they faced in the private sector. Some of the founding teachers were leftists engaged in organized struggles within different political parties. At the outset, the initiative attracted little attention, and these leftist founders had agreed not to allow any single organization to dominate the union. As the union expanded, however, the domination became a problem.

²⁷ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

Different leftist organizations have divergent approaches to unions, shaped by their distinct theories, political programs, and strategies. While the leftist teachers who were present at the union's founding process came from diverse backgrounds, they had reached a consensus not to impose their respective politics and strategies to avoid disputes that would not advance the teachers' struggle. Accordingly, they refrained from bringing in additional members of their own political organizations and sought to fill leadership positions with teachers emerging from the rank-and-file. Yet, as the union grew and began to attract wider attention, other leftist organizations attempted to recruit their members into the union in order to steer it toward their preferred line of struggle. These tensions reached a climax during the annual General Assembly elections in February 2025, sparking disputes among leftist teachers over who should occupy leadership positions. Some independent teachers, disillusioned by these developments, withdrew from the union.

The political and strategic differences between leftist and non-leftist teachers (or, as mentioned above, teachers with different types of class consciousness) led some leftist teachers to make such a move in the General Assembly. This example is valuable in demonstrating how much conflict this division within the union can create. The departure of some disillusioned non-leftist teachers from the union led to a slight weakening of the militant cadres. For example, Semiha left the union in a heated argument during this process, and Necip came close to leaving. This situation had the potential to disrupt the union's grassroots structure, which, in Necip's words, "turned its face to the grassroots." Fortunately, in the aftermath of the General Assembly, the union did not fall under the control of any single organization. Even small numbers of cadres with class struggle consciousness left the union, diversity was maintained, with both leftist and non-leftist teachers continuing to occupy positions across various bodies. Therefore, these disagreements did not materially weaken actions in terms of lower participation or split campaigns, they were contained enough that struggles still advanced. Nevertheless, these experiences highlighted the potential value of restructuring the union along a

labor-based hierarchy, both to strengthen grassroots participation and to prevent similar crises from arising in the future.

§ 5.3 Sectoral Level: Transforming Structural Conditions and the Sector

As an extension of neoliberalism, the private education sector had been excessively deregulated and left to the market forces. Through its struggles, the PSTU compelled the industry to be re-regulated in various respects, often by assuming this regulatory function, thereby bringing about a partial retreat of neoliberalism. This section seeks to explain this process of re-regulation.

Although private education institutions are formally under the authority of the MEB, in practice they remain largely unmonitored, with inspections carried out perfunctorily. They are not subject to regulation concerning student tuition fees, teachers' salaries, or other financial matters. Moreover, despite existing legal provisions regarding teachers' rights, many private institutions systematically engage in practices that contravene these regulations. In the absence of effective oversight, such practices have become normalized. Furthermore, certain legal provisions, such as the fixed-term employment contract, ostensibly included to protect teachers, in practice serve the purpose of maximizing employers' profits. The sector is thus characterized simultaneously by deregulation and by regulations that disproportionately favor employers.

By organizing within this sector, the PSTU secured several significant achievements in terms of labor conditions. Among these were the restoration of teachers' vacation rights, partial wage increases across the sector, and the termination of the fraudulent practice of ten-month contracts.

Private schools, shielded from effective oversight, continued education during official holidays, on days when provincial authorities suspended education, and throughout the summer and winter breaks. Beyond legitimate programs such as seminars and in-service training approved by MEB, these activities were conducted informally and

illegally. They effectively deprived teachers of their right to vacation, and no overtime pay was provided for participation. Many schools instituted such programs in order to avoid granting teachers paid leave during the summer and winter, while also charging parents additional fees for these programs, thereby generating profit.

Through complaints, school raids, and social media activism, the PSTU restored teachers' right to vacation. During holiday periods, the union collected information from teachers through forms identifying schools that continued education. These schools were then reported to MEB with requests for inspections. As noted in Chapter 4, when inspections failed to take place and falsified reports were produced, teachers began directly confronting school principals through raids. By publicizing these actions on social media, schools were exposed, the union's visibility increased, and new teachers from other institutions were drawn into its orbit. After dozens of such raids, many private schools—particularly in Istanbul—ceased violating teachers' vacation rights, seeking to avoid being publicly targeted. In this way, actions carried out at individual workplaces generated sector-wide changes.

In private schools, new graduates from universities' education faculties were typically employed at the minimum wage, while more experienced teachers earned only slightly above it. During the pandemic, amid soaring inflation, Turkey introduced the practice of raising the minimum wage twice annually. However, this regulation had an unintended consequence: although the minimum wage increased twice a year, most workers—including private school teachers—whose salaries were not adjusted with the same frequency and at the same rate effectively fell below the minimum wage. Private schools granted raises below the inflation rate and continued to implement only a single annual adjustment. During this period, numerous spontaneous and organized teacher mobilizations erupted across schools. While the union supported some of these actions, it was unable to reach others.

In particular, during the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 academic years, teachers at Bahçeler College, Pacific College, MDC Schools, FİLKEN, FİLSET, Ziya Schools, and many others organized actions demanding

wage increases and other improvements, achieving consecutive gains. As a result, wages across the sector rose comparatively. Today, starting salaries for new teachers are nearly twice the minimum wage in almost every school in İstanbul, and the practice of paying below the minimum wage has been almost entirely eradicated in the sector.

Legally, for a teacher to be employed in a private school, the school administration must submit the signed employment contract to MEB. While several types of contracts are possible, the most common is the fixed-term employment contract, which cannot be shorter than twelve months under existing regulations. In principle, this requires twelve-month contracts renewed each August, with both parties deciding whether to continue the employment relationship. In practice, however, schools treat these contracts as a formality, submitting it to MEB while failing to implement its provisions. According to the contracts, teachers are entitled to twelve months of salary, including two months of paid leave during the summer, mirroring public-sector teachers. Yet, most private-sector teachers are unaware of this right.

Instead, teachers are simultaneously made to sign an additional ten-month contract. Many mistakenly believe that both contracts are identical and valid for ten months, and thus remain unaware of the twelve-month contract. Each summer, after the tenth month, teachers are compelled to sign resignation letters disguised as “termination documents.” These are submitted to MEB, officially justifying the withholding of summer salaries, thereby depriving teachers of their paid vacation entitlement.

Teachers’ compliance with this process—often without realizing their rights were being violated—stemmed both from their lack of awareness and from the legal ambiguities discussed in Chapter 4. Even teachers with leftist leanings and a strong sense of class consciousness were subject to these violations.

Immediately after its founding, the union held a comprehensive meeting on sectoral problems, with its first initiative being an awareness campaign against the ten-month contract fraud. Posters were prepared, announcements circulated, and schools engaging in this practice were

exposed. Lawsuits were filed against various institutions and most of them continue to this day. Teachers attending the union's weekly legal support events often presented cases similar to that of Teacher Murat described earlier—cases of ten-month contract violations. Through years of sustained work, the union has rendered the practice nearly obsolete in major cities such as Istanbul and Ankara.

A key commonality among these victories is that they were all sector-wide gains achieved through workplace-based actions. Rather than through general demonstrations or press statements in front of the Ministry, these gains were won through school-based protests, raids, exposés, and workplace resistance. They thus underscore the effectiveness of workplace-centered action.

Moreover, each of these gains represents a reintroduction of regulation into an excessively deregulated sector. Where neoliberal policy had left private education to the market—creating a deregulated and informal labor market—the union's struggle has reinstated more structured and formal practices. Although the durability and generalizability of these gains remain uncertain, the sector-wide transformations initiated by workplace-based struggles once again highlight the critical importance of such actions.

Nevertheless, these gains do not apply uniformly across all schools. Their permanence and generalizability remain open questions. Since they have not been codified into law—and even if codified, given the lack of effective inspections and enforcement—many unregulated institutions, often described as “underground,” continue operating under previous conditions. Yet, as the union sustains its struggle, these achievements are becoming more entrenched and expansive. The more actively provincial branches engage in such actions, the greater the number of institutions where rights violations are eliminated.

The findings of this chapter underscore that union struggle operates as a transformative force across multiple levels. For individual teachers, participation in resistance fostered collective identities rooted in solidarity, enabled the discovery of class positionality, and turned fear into

empowerment. For the union itself, continual engagement in struggle demanded strategic flexibility and produced organizational transformations, albeit accompanied by risks of bureaucratization and tendencies toward service unionism. For the private education sector, union actions effectively reintroduced regulatory practices into a deregulated environment, compelling schools and authorities to alter exploitative norms and practices even though this has not been that successful in each case.

Taken together, these transformations challenge the sharp analytical boundary between economic and political struggles. Workplace-based mobilizations generated profound subjective shifts and concrete improvements in working conditions, while broader campaigns expanded legitimacy, visibility, and membership. The union's real strength lay in articulating these dimensions into a holistic orientation of perpetual struggle, where depth and breadth reinforced one another. By transforming individuals, the organization, and the sector simultaneously, the PSTU demonstrated how union activism can both contest neoliberal restructuring and reimagine the conditions of work and collective life.

6

Conclusion

This thesis examined the emergence, strategies, and transformative effects of the Private Sector Teachers' Union (PSTU) within the broader revitalization of the Turkish labor movement (2021–2025). It posed two interlinked questions: (RQ1) how the sectoral conditions of precarity and deregulation shaped PSTU's strategic orientation; and (RQ2) how the ensuing struggles transformed teachers' empowerment, the union's strategic capacity and structure, and sectoral regulations. Using Burawoy's²⁸ extended case method to connect micro-level organizing to shifting political-economic contexts, the study argues that the privatized, immensely deregulated architecture of education both constrained institutional bargaining and channeled struggle toward public, disruptive, and coalition-oriented repertoires. This trajectory was not structurally automatic: a militant minority catalyzed mobilization and sustained it through dense peer ties and iterative learning. In turn, these struggles produced (i) subjective changes (worker confidence and collective efficacy), (ii) organizational changes (calibrated centralization with horizontal checks), and (iii) sectoral effects (limited re-regulatory moves and agenda-setting).

²⁸ Burawoy, "The Extended Case Method."

The central argument advanced here is that the specific conditions of Turkey's privatized and deregulated education sector have not only led to the need for the formation of PSTU but also shaped its militant and innovative strategies. These conditions—deregulation, low wages, insecure employment, lack of legal protections, and the state's repression of collective action—have pushed teachers toward forms of struggle that relied on direct action, public visibility, and grassroots mobilization which theoretically means a worker-to-worker model and class pole. Yet the thesis also highlights that this trajectory was not merely a structural inevitability: the agency, particularly that of a militant minority²⁹ within the teaching workforce, played a decisive role in establishing the union and sustaining its mobilization. In turn, these struggles transformed not only the teachers who participated in them but also the union itself and the sectoral conditions it confronted.

6.1.2 Synthesis of Findings

Across the chapters, three interrelated findings emerged. With respect to the first research question, the PSTU's repertoire of action—school-front protests, sit-ins, marches—was not merely innovative; it was also structurally induced by the unavailability of institutional bargaining mechanisms and strategically selected to create leverage through audience costs and reputational risks for employers. These actions placed the union squarely within what Hyman³⁰ conceptualizes as the class pole of the strategic triangle, moving beyond narrow market-based concerns to embrace broader collective mobilization. PSTU thus exemplifies how unions in repressive contexts can recompose their strategies away from institutional bargaining and toward militant mobilization.

Regarding the second research question, the study documents the subjective transformations that unionized teachers have experienced.

²⁹ Blanc, *Red State Revolt: The Teachers' Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics*; Birelma, "Militant Minority at Work: A Successful Case of Unionisation of Garment Workers in Istanbul."

³⁰ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

Drawing on Meyer's³¹ concept of "perpetual struggle," the thesis showed that many teachers embraced a continuous orientation toward conflict, redefining their sense of solidarity and collective efficacy in the process. Teachers' accounts illustrated how everyday participation in union activities fostered a new consciousness of themselves as workers in the struggle, while also challenging Meyer's claim that workplace-centered actions are less transformative than political campaigns. Echoing Birelma's³² critique, the PSTU case reveals that even localized workplace mobilizations can catalyze profound individual and collective transformations.

Moreover, the thesis demonstrated the dynamic interplay between union strategies and sectoral conditions. The deregulated structure of the education sector initially constrained teachers' capacity for collective bargaining but simultaneously created opportunities for public campaigning, coalition-building, and disruptive tactics for mobilized teachers. By pushing back against the neoliberal regime in education, the union not only improved working conditions for its members but also compelled public debate and limited forms of re-regulation of the sector. In this respect, PSTU contributed to reshaping the broader terrain of labor politics in Turkey, joining a wider trend of revitalization noted in recent studies³³.

6.2. Theoretical Engagements and Contributions

The study makes several theoretical contributions by critically engaging with existing frameworks. First Hyman's³⁴ strategic triangle provided a valuable framework for situating PSTU's orientation. The PSTU oriented at class-based militancy and far away from the market pole, given

³¹ Meyer, *Perpetual Struggle: Sources of Working-Class Identity and Activism in Collective Action*.

³² Birelma, *Ekmek ve Haysiyet Mücadelesi. Günümüz Türkiye'sinde Üç İşçi Hareketinin Etnografisi*.

³³ Birelma et al., "The Stubborn Persistence of Working-Class Protest in Turkey in an Age of Authoritarian Neoliberalism."

³⁴ Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*.

weak enforceability. This account underscores Hyman's compatibility even under authoritarian neoliberal juncture.

Building on Blanc's³⁵ worker-to-worker approach, this analysis illuminates complementary dimensions of PSTU's organizing. The union's reliance on dense interpersonal networks among teachers mirrored Blanc's focus on peer-to-peer, rank-and-file organizing. That grassroots character was the engine for strategic re-orientation among the poles, as dense peer ties and rank-and-file initiative seeded union recruitment, diffused tactics across schools and gained public visibility via collective actions. The thesis highlighted how effective organizing in hostile contexts depends on initiatives undertaken by workers themselves.

The engagement with Meyer's³⁶ theory of transformation and Birelma's³⁷ critique offered further refinement. PSTU's case complicates Meyer's distinction between economic and political action by showing how workplace-based mobilizations can also generate sustained class struggle consciousness. In this sense, the thesis contributes to the literature on the subjective transformation by demonstrating that the boundary between economic and political struggles is often blurred in practice, particularly under neoliberal regimes, where workplace grievances quickly escalate into political confrontations with the state.

Finally, Burawoy's³⁸ extended case method shaped the reflexive and contextualized analysis. By situating micro-level interactions—such as union meetings, sit-ins and protests—within broader historical and political dynamics, the study was able to extend existing theoretical frameworks rather than merely applying them. Moreover, the reflexive stance of the researcher, simultaneously acting as both participant and researcher, highlighted both the potentials and dilemmas of embedded ethnographic research within social movements.

³⁵ Blanc, *We Are the Union: How Worker-to-Worker Organizing Is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big*.

³⁶ Meyer, *Perpetual Struggle: Sources of Working-Class Identity and Activism in Collective Action*.

³⁷ Birelma, *Ekmek ve Haysiyet Mücadelesi. Günümüz Türkiye'sinde Üç İşçi Hareketinin Etnografisi*.

³⁸ Burawoy, "The Extended Case Method."

Taken together, the findings make three significant contributions to scholarship on labor and social movements. First, the thesis enriches debates on union revitalization by foregrounding the role of independent, grassroots unions in authoritarian neoliberal contexts. Whereas much of the literature focuses on established confederations or Western cases, PSTU demonstrates how new forms of unionism can emerge even in repressive environments and precarious sectors. By institutionalizing horizontal accountability within a calibrated centralization, PSTU shows that militant bottom-up unionism can generate organizational strength, public visibility and sector-wide gains without relying on established confederations.

Second, the study advances theoretical discussions by integrating multiple frameworks—Hyman’s strategic orientations, Blanc’s worker-to-worker model, and Meyer’s transformation thesis—into a single analysis. The empirical findings not only confirm some aspects of these frameworks but also reveal their limitations and suggest refinements. For example, while the strategic orientation of PSTU demonstrated how authoritarian neoliberalism systematically constrains and channels the strategies of unions, the worker-to-worker model ensures scaling up and mobilizing the base.

Third, the research makes an empirical contribution by analyzing the private education workforce in Turkey, a sector largely overlooked in labor studies. In a political environment where unionization historically and politically has been facing significant problems, by focusing on teachers, the research highlights the intersection of professional precarity and union militancy, offering insights relevant both to Turkey and beyond, to global debates on education, privatization, and labor organizing.

6.3 Limitations of the Study

Like all research, the study is shaped by certain limitations. First, while the extended case method and long duration of participatory observations enabled rich contextual insights, the reliance on a relatively small number of in-depth interviews limits the generalizability of the

findings. Broader surveys of private-sector teachers could have provided additional evidence on the scope and depth of transformations. Second, the study focuses primarily on the internal dynamics and strategies of PSTU, with less systematic attention to the perspectives of employers, state actors, or other unions. Incorporating these voices could have offered a more comprehensive picture of the sectoral dynamics. Moreover, while intersectional differences and resentments were briefly noted, the study did not fully explore how these axes of identity shaped participation, leadership, and risk-taking. Given the centrality of intersectionality in contemporary labor scholarship, future work should pay closer attention to how gender, race, and other axes of difference shape union strategies and transformations. Finally, the researcher's positionality as both participant and researcher raises potential concerns of over-identification. While reflexivity was a guiding principle, it remains possible that sympathy for the union led to an underestimation of internal tensions or strategic failures³⁹. These limitations open up several avenues for further research. Comparative studies across different sectors in Turkey could test whether the dynamics identified here are specific to education or generalizable to other precarious industries. Similarly, cross-national comparisons with teacher unions in other neoliberal contexts would deepen our understanding of the global dimensions of militant revitalization.

Future research could also employ mixed methods, combining ethnography with quantitative surveys or protest event analysis, to better capture the scale and distribution of transformations. Additionally, greater attention should be devoted to intersectional dynamics, particularly how gendered and generational experiences shape mobilization.

Although beyond the scope of this study, future research that situates the union's structural transformations within the literature on the

³⁹ Ibid.; Birelma, *Ekmek ve Haysiyet Mücadelesi. Günümüz Türkiye'sinde Üç İşçi Hareketinin Etnografisi*.

centralization–decentralization dichotomy in organizational management⁴⁰ would also provide an important contribution to ongoing debates on trade union organizational forms.

Finally, further theoretical development is warranted. The permeability of economic and political struggles observed here suggests the need to reconceptualize the boundaries of Meyer's framework, while Blanc's model points toward the possibility of a hybrid conceptualization of grassroots organizing that captures both coalition-building and relational networks.

Beyond its scholarly contributions, the study offers practical insights for labor activists. It suggests that unions in repressive and deregulated environments can expand their strategic capacity by institutionalizing grievance-to-action pipelines, such as legal support days, that convert individual complaints into collective leverage. Hybrid governance structures that balance centralized coordination with horizontal assemblies can enhance both effectiveness and accountability. Moreover, investments in peer-to-peer networks can sustain mobilization during periods of repression or demobilization. The findings indicate that bounded re-regulation often emerges when public campaigns heighten enforcement salience, highlighting the political responsiveness of labor regulation even under authoritarian conditions.

The story of the Private Sector Teachers' Union is one of courage, creativity, and transformation in the face of repression and precarity. By carving out spaces for militant, bottom-up unionism, PSTU not only challenged exploitative conditions in the education sector but also contributed to the broader revitalization of labor in Turkey. In doing so, it

⁴⁰ H. Rantakari, "Governing Adaptation," *The Review of Economic Studies* 75, no. 4 (2008): 1257–85; R. Alonso et al., "Centralization versus Decentralization: An Application to Price Setting by a Multi-Market Firm," *Journal of the European Economic Association* 6, nos. 2–3 (2008): 457–67; R. Alonso et al., "Organizing to Adapt and Compete," *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics* 7, no. 2 (2015): 158–87; D.J. Cooper and J. Brandts, *Centralized vs. Decentralized Management: an Experimental Study*, Barcelona School of Economics, 2015.

extended the reach of theoretical debates on union strategies, transformation, and revitalization.

Ultimately, the case of PSTU affirms that unions, even in contexts of authoritarian neoliberalism, retain the capacity to innovate, mobilize, and transform. Their struggles remind us that the future of labor is not predetermined by structural constraints but is continually shaped by the collective agency of workers who dare to fight for dignity and justice. In documenting and analyzing this struggle, this thesis has sought not only to understand but also to honor that ongoing project of emancipation.



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