

Turkey: corruption scandal erupts in Tek Gida-Is trade union bureaucracy

Our correspondent
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Tek Gida-Is, the Union of Tobacco, Alcoholic Beverage, Food and Related Industry Workers of Turkey, has been shaken by allegations of corruption. Amid claims of widespread corruption in the central office of the union, the chairman, Korkut Guler, has resigned, citing the allegations as the reason.

According to press reports, apart from Chairman Guler, those accused include General Secretary Mustafa Turkel, General Secretary of Finance Zeki Sesen, General Secretary of Planning Turan Ayber and General Secretary of Education Mesuthan Colak.

Newspapers have been filled with allegations of top union officials betting large amounts of the union's money on horse races and other forms of gambling.

It is expected that the union will shortly call an early general assembly.

Corruption scandals are not new to Tek Gida-Is, nor to the Turkish trade union movement in general. For example, in May 1980, a union member sent a letter to the then-Martial Law Command of Istanbul accusing board members of Tek Gida-Is of embezzling union funds. The union leaders were indicted and the case ended with the acquittal of board members, but the accounting manager of the union was sentenced to heavy fines and a temporary professional ban.

There is a long history of corruption within the Turkish trade union bureaucracy, although the phenomenon has grown more pronounced over the past 25 years. This coincides with the general decline and decadence of unions all over the world.

What is extraordinary about this particular scandal is the amount of money that has reportedly been stolen. According to allegations, 10 million YTL (\$7.5 million) is missing. The allegations surfaced not as a result of an independent or legal investigation, but apparently as the product of abuses that snowballed out

of control.

Like all other Turkish workers, the 200,000 Tek Gida-Is members have seen their real wages continually decline, while their union leaders continued to give themselves large pay checks.

In the past 11 years, Turkey has experienced three severe economic crises: in 1994, 1999 and 2001. These successive economic disasters have brought unprecedented deprivations to the public workers as well as the vast majority of the population of the country. According to figures provided by the Turkish Central Bank, in the crisis year of 1994 real wages fell by 30 per cent and did not recover until 2000.

The bureaucracy of Turk-Is, to which Tek Gida-Is belongs, played a treacherous role by signing three successive agreements with the government (in 1995, 1997 and 1999) which kept real wages depressed. With the 2001 crisis, the most severe Turkey has seen in its modern history, real wages plummeted even further—more than 25 percent in 2001-2004.

Especially over the past five years, the Turk-Is bureaucracy has been doing its best to suppress militant workers' struggles, and played a critical role in giving life to the neo-liberal recovery program.

Almost all the leaderships of the Turkish trade unions, regardless of their affiliation to different national centres (Turk-Is, DISK and Hak-Is are the three major trade union structures in Turkey under a confederation) maintain a profligate middle-class lifestyle. They wear the most expensive suits, drive the most expensive cars and live in luxury houses.

Trade union bureaucrats pocket workers' money by means of an elaborate system involving the national leaderships, local leaders and a core network of shady congress delegates. They react antagonistically to any demand from the rank-and-file for democracy and

accountability. Ordinary members of the major unions have no means of keeping track of where their dues money is going. Demanding accountability from their union will put the workers' jobs and even their safety at risk.

However, up to now only a few of the corruption charges have been scrutinized and those implicated are usually acquitted and go unpunished.

This state of affairs is compatible with a dying organism, if not an outright corpse. In the era of globalisation and privatisation in Turkey, the unions face a rapid decline in membership as they become increasingly irrelevant both to the workers and to public and private employers, who seek alliances with more stable allies such as the European and US elites, and rely on international competitiveness rather than the services of national union bureaucrats.

In a space of 25 years, the total number of workers covered by a collective bargaining agreements have fallen from 2 million to 870,000. As a result, union bureaucrats are more likely to resort to desperate measures as their "market value" declines and their privileges come under increasing threat.

Most of the Tek Gida-Is members are TEKEL workers, and TEKEL, the state-owned tobacco company, is on the verge of privatisation. Up to now, the union has limited itself to issuing statements full of chauvinism and organising ineffective, token actions. In contrast to the tobacco markets in Western Europe and the US, the Turkish tobacco market is growing very rapidly, and the cheap labour force makes TEKEL an attractive investment for the transnational monopolies.



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