Fifty-five years after founding, Turkish union confederation a bureaucratic shell

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11 August 2007

Turkey's biggest trade union confederation, Turk-Is, which was founded on July 31, 1952, is currently celebrating 55 years of existence. Any celebration, however, is largely limited to the corrupt trade union bureaucracy and ignored by the Turkish working class. The total membership of Turk-Is has fallen to a historical low of 450,000-500,000.

Officially, the Turk-Is bureaucracy adopts a so-called "non-partisan position" with regard to politics, resembling the standpoint of most American unions.

There are two other trade union confederations. The moribund social democratic, pro-European Union DISK has several tens of thousands of members, while the Islamist Hak-Is has a slightly larger membership.

Today, these three confederations together represent less than 7 percent of the Turkish working class. The huge loss of membership of the Turkish unions is likely to continue unabated in the future.

In 1945, under international pressure (including direct territorial threats from the Stalinist bureaucracy of the Soviet Union), the successor to Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (the first president and founder of modern Turkey), Ismet Inonu, was forced to end single-party rule. During this period, he also lifted the ban on establishing class-based organisations. As a result, trade union organisations mushroomed all over the country, and eventually Turk-Is was founded in 1952 by 10 individual unions as well as regional union federations.

The post-war years saw a rapid rise of the Turkish industrial bourgeoisie and a parallel growth of the working class. Due to the relative weakness of the Turkish bourgeoisie, which was largely based on commerce, banking, insurance, transportation and agriculture, the central state remained the driving force of the process of transition to industrial capitalism.

Turk-Is was predominantly organised in the public sector, and this has characterised the organisation ever since. From its early days, the Turk-Is leadership established a bureaucratic structure that functioned in close cooperation with the government, resulting in growing privileges for the union officialdom.

In 1950, the right-wing Democrat Party (DP), led by Adnan Menderes, came to power in Turkey's first genuinely free election. (The previous election in 1946 was characterised by widespread fraud and anti-democratic interventions.)

The formation of the DP government resulted in a regime that directly bribed the unions. According to one commentator, just for the year 1952, overall revenue from membership dues was less than one forth of the total revenues of Turk-Is.

The late 1950s was a period of economic and social crisis. In early 1960, social unrest and massive student protests were rampant. A putschist dynamic developed within the military, which led to a military coup staged by young officers on May 27, 1960. At that point, Turk-Is sided with the DP.

After the coup, Turk-Is was punished for its close links to the DP. The chairman and general secretary were both forced to resign following accusations that the union leadership had won elections with the help of the former government.

With Turkey's swift integration into the imperialist Western camp during the cold war, anti-communism became a trademark of the Turkish establishment. In 1962, Turk-Is organised a demonstration at Tandogan Square in Ankara and mobilised its members to condemn communism.

In 1966, in reply to the criticisms from the centrist Workers Party of Turkey (TIP), founded in 1963 by trade unionists supporting the idea of "class- and mass-based unionism," Turk-Is Chairman Seyfi Demirsoy declared that the confederation did not conduct a policy of class struggle, but rather a struggle for "humane living conditions."

At its 7th Congress in 1968, a resolution was adopted defining the 24 principles of Turk-Is, which are still in force today. Number 3 was a declaration of loyalty to the Turkish state. It laid down that a "principle task" was "to struggle with full power against any attempts to establish a non-constitutional social and economic order, to alter the form of the state, or to destroy Ataturk's reforms and democracy."

At its 8th General Assembly meeting in 1970, the Turk-Is bureaucracy approved the membership of Turksen (the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions of Cyprus) as a part of Ankara's invasion plans and preparations for targeting Cyprus.

In 1970, deputies of the right-wing AP (Justice Party) government from the Turk-Is leadership prepared a restrictive and anti-democratic draft law aimed at making Turk-Is de facto the only active confederation and liquidating all rival organisations. This led to spontaneous and massive demonstrations on June 15-16 by workers—mostly DISK

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members.

A number of workers were killed in clashes with the security forces, and hundreds were injured. After these events, martial law was declared, and a large number of workers were arrested and/or fired from their jobs. Turk-Is declared that it did not condone the demonstrations, but hypocritically also criticised the arrests and sackings. The clashes were, in fact, the prelude to a new military intervention on March 12, 1971, and Turk-Is's attitude paved the way for this military intervention.

When Turkey began its invasion of northern Cyprus on July 20, 1974, the Turk-Is leadership immediately decided to suspend all strikes in order to support the government and the military action. The confederation declared that "the Turkish workers' movement is at the command of the Turkish nation and its courageous armed forces."

After the military coup on September 12, 1980, Turk-Is was the only trade union confederation that was allowed to function. Contract bargaining was not permitted by the Turkish state, but the loyal union bureaucrats collected dues from workers and enriched themselves.

The Turk-Is general secretary, Sadik Side, was appointed minister of labour by the National Security Council—i.e., the military junta. This took place at a time when hundreds of thousands people, including trade unionists, were detained and severely tortured. Hundreds of victims simply "disappeared." Side provided the smoke screen needed by the military junta, led by General Kenan Evren.

To give legitimacy to the junta, Turk-Is took part in discussions on a new constitution and trade union legislation. The 1982 constitution revoked many existing rights and freedoms, and new labour laws deprived workers of their most basic rights. The Turk-Is bureaucracy did manage to ameliorate some aspects of these laws, but only to protect their own material privileges.

The period opened up by the military dictatorship of 1980 was characterised by the rise of finance capital and market reforms in line with the "structural adjustment" programmes of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Turk-Is was a loyal supporter of the military regime and served as an instrument of the bourgeoisie to crush the workers' movement.

Throughout the 1990s and the current decade, the Turk-Is bureaucracy has adhered to its policy of close relations with the government. Not surprisingly, this is incompatible with any genuine democracy within the organisation.

Nowadays, the central leadership of Turk-Is as well as most of its affiliates are flirting with the Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party) government. Corruption within the ranks of trade union bureaucracy has reached new heights, and every year one or two major scandals have erupted within Turk-Is-affiliated unions.

On February 28, 1997, the military presented an ultimatum to the Islamist government and forced it to call new elections under the threat of a military takeover, Turk-Is and DISK supported the military by taking part in a "civil" platform consisting of two major employers' organisations and umbrella organisations of craftsmen and small traders.

Over the past 13 years, Turkey has experienced three severe economic crises: in 1994, 1999 and 2001. These successive crises have brought unprecedented deprivation to public service workers as well as the vast majority of the population. The Turk-Is bureaucracy has signed successive agreements with the government that have systematically depressed real wages.

Turk-Is is absolutely loyal to the foreign policy ambitions of the Turkish establishment and has issued strongly worded statements in defence of the regime on such issues as the Armenian genocide, the Kurdish question, the invasion of Cyprus and Turkey's military protectorate called the "Northern Cyprus Republic."

The Turkish unions in general and Turk-Is and its affiliates in particular have reached a point where their ability to control the working class on behalf of the capitalist establishment is in doubt. For Turk-Is, the possibility of remaining a confederation based on the public sector, coupled with good relations with the government and unprincipled manoeuvring, is coming to an end. The main reason is the massive privatisation of public assets under the AKP government.

According to the World Bank figures, over the past four years Turkey has become a global leader in privatisation. Recently, Turkey's Privatisation Administration (OIB) deputy head, Osman Demirci, declared that in the 20 years prior to 2003, Turkey carried out US$8 billion in privatisations, but that in the past four years alone, this figure had risen to US$18 billion.

Large privatisation projects in the energy and transportation sectors, along with the construction of new freeways and highways, are on the agenda. Under public ownership, an important portion of the workers in these sectors were members of Turk-Is-affiliated unions. Further privatisation and the subcontracting of labour will further hit the union's membership rolls.

In July 1992, the total membership of Turk-Is was reported to be 1,750,000. A projection based on current trends shows that in the space of 10 years this figure will be fewer than 300,000, while the total number of workers in Turkey will have increased to more than 15 million.

No class-conscious worker will mourn the passing of Turk-Is, but it is necessary to draw political conclusions from its history in order to found a new political organisation that will take up the struggle for social equality in Turkey on the basis of an international socialist perspective.

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