Societal Context of Labor Union Strategy : The Case of Turkey

Fikret Adaman, Ayse Bugra and Ahmet Insel

Labor Studies Journal 2009 34: 168 originally published online 26 February 2008
DOI: 10.1177/0160449X07309937

Labor Studies Journal
Volume 34 Number 2
June 2009 168-188

10.1177/0160449X07309937
http://lsj.sagepub.com
hosted at
http://online.sagepub.com

Societal Context of Labor Union Strategy

The Case of Turkey

Fikret Adaman
Ayşe Buğra
Boğaziçi University
Ahmet İnsel
Galatasaray University

This article questions the societal context of labor union strategy for the case of Turkey, where the legacy of the military junta of 1980–1983 is still vivid. The results by and large indicate a clear rupture between unionized and nonunionized workers, a fact that highlights the significance of innovative union strategies directed at expanding membership in a way to include atypical workers so as to resist union decline. This rupture also points, however, to the reasons why such strategies might not be forthcoming where they are especially needed. Where unions have a precarious existence, the expansion of the membership base could be the only way to gain legitimacy and power. Yet, it is precisely their precarious existence that might condemn unions to a myopic strategy, leading them to concentrate on the interests of their limited membership that they try to maintain at all cost.

Keywords: *informal market; labor union strategies; Turkey; unemployment*

A series of technological, socioeconomic and political changes taking place at a global level have led to a decline in union density, and labor unions throughout the world have consequently been losing power and influence. While many of the studies on labor unions conducted during the last two decades take this observation as their starting point, these studies also highlight the fact that neither the factors behind, nor the nature of the strategic response to, the difficulties faced by unions are

Authors' Note: The study on which this article is based was undertaken with financial support from Boğaziçi University Research Fund (project no. 04M103) and the Open Society Institute Foundation, for which we are grateful. We would like to thank Burcu Yakut-Çakar and Ceren Soylu for their very able assistance, Frekans Research Ltd. for its meticulous fieldwork, J. Cameron and I. van Staveren for their valuable comments during the presentation of this article at the International Annual EAEPE Conference held in Istanbul in November 2006, and three anonymous referees for their constructive criticisms. The usual disclaimer applies. Correspondence should be addressed to Ayşe Buğra, SPF, Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, 34342, Turkey.

the same in different contexts. There are differences, in particular, between the situations prevailing in the countries of the North and those in the South, notwithstanding the considerable amount of diversity within each group (Gallin 2001; Iranzo and Patruyo 2002; Munck 2002; Silver 2003; Frege and Kelly 2004). In a parallel vein, research in the area indicates that along with "snakes," representing problems that lead to the weakening of trade unions, there are also "ladders," relating to the possibility of union revitalization (Crouch 2000). This article presents a case study on labor and labor organizations in Turkey, with a view to exploring both the scope for strategic actions available to unions and the latter's ability to make use of this potential.

Current problems of labor union activity emerge in a context characterized, first, by widespread unemployment that presents a threat to workers throughout the world. Today, unemployment seems to be a problem that does not disappear even in periods of economic expansion.[1] What is also worth noting is the increasing significance of atypical forms of employment. The transition from "Fordism" to "flexible production" has not only led to the replacement of full-time, permanent jobs with part-time, temporary ones, but has also brought along a novel significance of informal employment. Notwithstanding the obvious difficulty of statistically assessing the size of the informal sector, available estimates clearly indicate that we are far from dealing with a marginal phenomenon.[2] In the countries of the South, where informal sector has always been important but has often remained separated from the formal economy, we now observe a blurring of the boundaries between these two sectors. This is a new development, which is closely related to the increasing significance of subcontracting and outsourcing practices that have accompanied the process of globalization (Beneria 2001; Munck 2002, 111–22).

Such changes taking place in the world of labor are situated in the context of an overall transformation, which some writers have described in terms of a transition from "organized" to "disorganized capitalism" (Lash and Ury 1987) or with reference to a pendulum swing from a "regulated" to an "unregulated systemic cycle" (Arrighi 1994). Like the vertically integrated and bureaucratically managed big enterprise in the public or private sector, the labor union, as an organizational form that conforms to the institutional environment of organized or regulated capitalism, may appear to be badly placed to respond to the realities of the new environment.

The difficulties faced by labor unions are enhanced by the increasing mobility of capital that limits the ability of the nation-state to take part in industrial relations on behalf of workers and their representatives. Given the contemporary realities of the global economy, social actors—such as consumer organizations that demand transnational corporations to respect labor standards at a global level, international organizations that call for more "corporate social responsibility" or, in a different vein, social movements that present more "flexible" organizational forms than unions—are at times seen to be in a more appropriate position to deal with the current problems of working life (Elliott and Freeman 2003; Waterman 2005).[3]

Current difficulties of labor union activity do not, in other words, stem from a simple change in economic circumstances but from an overall institutional transformation where the very "relevance" of union activity is questioned. This question of relevance is easily merged with a legitimacy problem given the fact that large segments of the global labor force remain outside any collective bargaining process. Consequently, at least in certain social contexts, the public perception of unions can change in such a way that they are seen to be detached from the realities of the life and livelihood of workers at large, and are regarded as limited in their objectives in that they seem to be protecting the privileges of the already privileged.

Such an erosion of the basis of social legitimacy of labor unions can be overcome to the extent that the latter are able to take advantage of a viable strategic choice, a "ladder," available to them. Presenting this argument in the European context, Crouch (2000) argues that the strategic choice in question has to do with the existence of a serious "social problem" constituted by the new realities of working life, which opens a potential field of action for unions. This field is created by the increasing significance of atypical workers, hitherto considered to be impossible to organize but who today constitute a group more in need of labor organizations than any other to deal with the violations of social rights that they daily encounter. Hence, the ability to reach and organize different segments of a heterogeneous working class becomes a major factor determining union revitalization. In fact, as Heery and Adler (2004, 57) mention in their study covering five different countries of the North (UK, United States, Germany, Italy, and Spain), each national labor movement has taken steps to broaden its membership among nontraditional workers, with varying intensity of effort and degree of success. Such a strategic orientation is all the more important in the countries of the South, given both the statistical significance and the changing nature of informality (Gallin 2001; Munck 2002, 106–34).

It is possible to suggest, then, that the unions find themselves in a position to seriously consider the balance between their short-term and long-term interests. The unions' short-term interests might lead them to use their scarce resources "efficiently" by concentrating on what they are traditionally accustomed to do, that is, to defend the interests of an ever-shrinking group of typical workers in the formal sector. Such a choice is likely to be self-defeating in the long run, to the extent that it would aggravate the twin dangers of loss of relevance and legitimacy (Crouch 2000, 75; Gallin 2001). The relative intensity of the effort made to expand membership on the one hand and to maintain status quo on the other would of course be determined within the society-specific context in which unions operate. In this regard, the institutional basis of union activity and the attitudes toward organized labor would play a crucial role in determining how short-term and long-term interests would be balanced. In certain countries, at a given historical moment, the social environment of union activity could be so hostile that room for strategies conducive to union revitalization might appear to be very limited. Hence, the unions can find themselves

faced with a vicious cycle where the struggle for survival in difficult circumstances might cripple the efforts to change those circumstances.

The present article pursues this idea through a case study on labor and labor organizations in Turkey, where both the existing union legislation and the attitudes of not only the employers but also the general public still reflect the legacy of a military coup that took place in 1980. The hostile political and societal environment that was boosted by the generals during the military regime covering the 1980–1983 period in the country was juxtaposed with a series of technological, socioeconomic, and political changes, causing very serious erosion in Turkish unions' membership figures, not to mention their shrinking political/ideological influence over the society at large.

In Turkey, unions operate in a highly segmented labor market. There are important differences between the circumstances and characteristics of the employees of modern enterprises and those employed in smaller firms using less-advanced technologies or in the informal sector. As we discuss in this article on the basis of our research results, an especially important element of segmentation pertains to the privileged position of union members that distinguishes them from other workers. In such a setting, by dealing with the problems of all workers beyond their constituency, labor organizations could have a stronger position in society. However, given the constraints of the environment in which labor unions operate, the latter are compelled to follow a short-sighted strategy in an attempt to protect their ever-diminishing membership base. This strategy tends, in turn, to limit the prospects for the improvement of the position of labor organizations in society through, among other channels, a larger popular support for their demands for legislative change. Hence, the vicious cycle that marks the context of union decline in Turkey affects all three major union confederations regardless of the differences in their organizational history and political outlook.

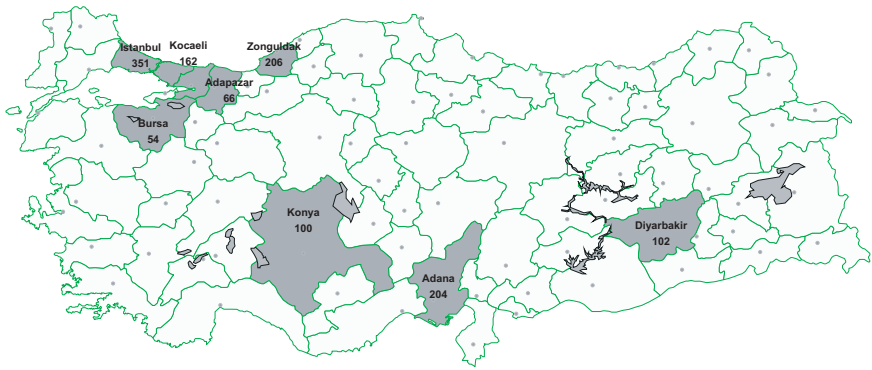
The discussion presented in this article is based on the findings of a study conducted in 2004–2005 in six sectors (textiles and clothing; food processing; rubber and chemicals; automotive; mining; and municipal services of road maintenance, parks, and waste collection) and eight cities (Istanbul, Kocaeli, Bursa, Zonguldak, Karaman, Kayseri, Adana, Diyarbakır). This choice of sectors and cities was informed by the desire to avoid possible biases resulting from characteristics specific to certain localities and fields of activity. The field research involved: (a) a quantitative questionnaire survey covering 1,245 unionized, nonunionized but formally employed, and informal sector workers; (b) focus groups with a total of eighty-nine workers; and (c) open-ended interviews with nineteen union representatives.

The quantitative questionnaire survey was based on the following quota sampling method: We had 1,200 interviews divided equally (two hundred) among the six sectors mentioned above. In each sector, the half of each sectoral survey (one hundred) was allocated to unionized workers, with the remaining half divided equally between nonunionized formal sector employees and the informally employed (fifty each). No further quotas were imposed on the sample, although care was taken to avoid overrepresentation of certain sectors, localities, or unions. We were unable to impose a

Table 1
Sectoral Distribution of the Survey

	Unionized	Formal but Not Union	Informal	Total
Textile	100	56	54	210
Automobile	121	49	49	219
Chemistry	91	52	51	194
Food	103	52	52	207
Mining	101	52	52	205
Municipality	104	58	48	210
Total	620	319	306	1,245

Figure 1
Geographical Distribution of the Survey



gender break, given the extremely low female labor force participation rate and the very unequal gender division in some of the sectors under investigation (i.e. almost exclusively male employment in the mining and the municipal sectors). Table 1 and Figure 1, respectively, show the breakdown of the completed surveys and the cities where the surveys were conducted.

The surveys were undertaken between August and September 2004—when there were no significant political/economic changes that would have influenced the answers—by a professional research company whose interviewers received a full day of training from us. Each survey, consisting of 150 questions, took about half an hour. These face-to-face interviews were carried out at places where the workers, especially the informal ones, would not feel uncomfortable. Most of the interviews took place in local coffee houses (*kahvehane*) where workers would normally go after their work hours and in some other cases at local restaurants during lunch breaks.

Legal, Ideological, and Economic Coordinates of Labor Union Activity in Turkey

In Turkey, the attitudes toward class-based interest representation have historically been quite skeptical. In 1946, after the country's transition to multiparty democracy, legislation pertaining to associational activity was changed to allow the establishment of trade unions, but the scope for collective bargaining was severely limited and strikes remained prohibited. Until 1967, Türk-İş, established in 1952, was the only confederation that was allowed to exist as an organization under the influence of the state. In the 1960s, with the constitutional changes that ushered in a liberal environment, the scope for organizational activity greatly expanded and allowed for the establishment of DİSK, The Confederation of Revolutionary Labor Unions, as a leftist alternative to Türk-İş. Apart from Türk-İş and DİSK, another currently significant labor union confederation is Hak-İş, which was formed in 1976 and is known by its closeness to Islamic politics.

Between 1967 and the military intervention of 1980, the radical unionism of DİSK significantly marked the Turkish labor unionism. DİSK pursued a successful collective bargaining strategy that implied important improvements in the economic circumstances of its members. Although its strategy was a highly confrontational one, in the context of a protected economy where both international and domestic competition was highly limited and capacity utilization was much less than full, the union's economic demands could be accommodated by the management and even the recurrent strikes could be tolerated.

In the 1980s, both the economic circumstances and the political environment significantly changed. Turkey left a state-controlled, protectionist economic strategy for a market-oriented, outward-looking one where competition was to be taken seriously. What is significant is that the transformation in question took place in an undemocratic political environment marked by the constitutional and legislative changes brought about by the military intervention of 1980. After the intervention, there was an interruption in all types of associational activity, but the measures taken against DİSK were exceptional. The confederation, which could only resume its activities in 1992, saw its assets confiscated and its leaders brought to court with criminal charges calling for the death penalty in certain cases.

What happened to DİSK was an indication of a serious change in the political atmosphere: the tolerance for class-based organizational activity was rapidly eroded after a brief period of less than two decades when labor unions appeared as important social actors. What the new, postmilitary coup environment implied for workers and their representatives was succinctly summarized by the president of the Turkish Employers' Union Confederation (TİSK) who was quoted as saying that "For years on end the workers laughed and the employers cried, now the time has come for the employers to laugh" (Nichols and Suğur 2004, 154). The change in question was in conformity with the transformations taking place in economic life, where international

competition had acquired a novel significance, and it was reinforced by legal changes brought along by the military coup.

The military regime introduced three particularly important changes in labor union legislation. First, sympathy strikes and strikes over issues other than wages were forbidden and it was made possible for the political authority to postpone permitted strikes for reasons of "national security," very loosely defined in a way to include national economic interest in, for example, the maintenance of export revenues. Another one had to do with "threshold requirements," whereby the collective bargaining rights of a union are made conditional upon its ability to organize at least 10 percent of all workers in the relevant sector and 50 percent of those in any given enterprise. A third change implied an enormous increase in bureaucracy and related costs of registering new members.[4]

With the return to normal electoral democracy at the end of the 1980s, there was also a revival of union activity and the early 1990s witnessed an important increase in strike activity, including the massive general strike launched by both white-collar and blue-collar workers. In 1992, DİSK could finally resume its activities, albeit with great difficulty because it had to comply with highly complicated and very costly bureaucratic requirements as it tried to restore its membership. Starting with the mid-1990s, Turkey's entry into the EU Customs Union and the Helsinki summit where the country formally acquired status as a candidate to the EU have also brought about some changes favorable to organized interest representation. What is now clear to all social actors involved, i.e. unions, government authorities, private business and business associations, is that as long as Turkey's EU accession process does not come to a halt, the space open to organized interest representation by unions could not be contested.

However, as repeatedly mentioned in the successive *EU Progress Reports* on Turkey's accession process, both the legal setting and the economic environment have remained laden with difficulties that have crippled union activity and effective channels of social dialogue (European Commission 2001, 67–69; 2002, 94; 2003, 85–87; 2004, 47 and 85–7, 2005, 96; and 2006, 50–1). While public sector employees were allowed to unionize by a legal change introduced in 2001, strike activity by these unions is still legally prohibited.[5] The new Labor Law of 2003 has certain provisions against arbitrary dismissal, including dismissal on grounds of union membership, but its scope of application remains limited. Small enterprises employing less than thirty members in industry and less than fifty workers in agriculture are still not covered by the new Labor Law.[6] Perhaps more significantly, the above-mentioned restrictive clauses of labor union legislation union introduced during the military regime have remained in place.

As late as 2004, the government used its prerogative to postpone strikes in relation to the decisions to go on strike first by glass workers' and then tire producers' unions, both affiliated with Türk-İş, on the grounds that they were inimical to national interest.[7] National interest was defined in relation to the country's export performance,

not only in these two sectors but also in the automotive industry, which they supply with inputs. Through these incidents, the mainstream newspapers in general adopted an overtly hostile attitude toward the unions, with certain columnists referring to the unacceptability of a state of affairs where the economic interests of the nation could be compromised by organized labor. The fact that the latter constitutes a small and highly privileged segment of the workforce was repeatedly underlined through the discussions around the issue.[8]

Labor unions, in other words, are not only faced with severe legal constraints but are also in a position to function in an ideologically hostile environment. The hostility in question is often translated into charges of corruption against union leaders, which might occasionally be well founded.[9] Whether factually true or not, such charges constitute a defining element of the erosion of the basis of social legitimacy enjoyed by organized labor. It should be made clear that negative attitudes toward unions extend beyond the mainstream media to the general public, and unionized workers as well as their representatives are aware of this. In fact, in one of the focus group meetings unionized workers talked extensively of incidents where workers on strike were insulted by passersby who blamed them for being too greedy to be satisfied with their high wages and excellent working conditions. This is reflected in the results of public surveys on the levels of public trust enjoyed by different organizations. In Turkey such surveys conducted in 2000 and 2004 show that labor unions are among those institutions least liked—on a scale of 0–10, where 0 indicates no trust at all and 10 indicates full trust, the percentages of the population who gave 6–10 in the 2000 and 2004 surveys are thirty-four and thirty-eight, respectively (Adaman, Çarkoğlu, and Şenatalar 2001, 2005). What is interesting is that, from 2000 to 2004, although there has been a radical improvement in the ranking of all organizations, that of labor unions remained rather marginal.

Accompanying this legal setting and the ideological environment hostile to labor union activity are economic circumstances that are hardly conducive to the success of organized interest representation. Many of the labor market problems currently experienced in Turkey emerge in a context of rapid structural change. Until quite recently, the bulk of employment was in the agricultural sector, whereas today urban labor force in industry and services is much larger than rural workforce—the share in total employment of the agricultural sector made a sharp decline from 52.7 percent to 29.5 percent in the last twenty-five years (TURKSTAT 2006a).

The main challenge that emerges in such a context of structural transformation is to create enough urban employment to absorb the workforce that is leaving agriculture.[10] Since this is not always easy, there has been not only an increase in unemployment but also a decline in labor force participation and employment rates, which is especially severe in the case of female workers. Women, who normally work in the rural setting as unpaid family workers, often drop out of labor force once the family moves to the city. For the year 2005, the male labor force participation rate is 76.2 and the male rate of employment is 68.2. The parallel figures for women are 27.2 and 26.5, respectively.

It is especially in urban areas that female labor force participation and employment rates are strikingly low, 19.4 and 16.1 percent, respectively. The corresponding figures for men are 70.7 and 61.6, respectively (TURKSTAT 2006b).

Jobs available in the urban formal sector are affected by two developments of significance for organized labor. First, privatization of or labor shedding in public enterprises, which constitutes an important aspect of the transition to a market economy after 1980, left most of the former employees of these enterprises either unemployed or in insecure jobs, nonunionized and often outside formal social security coverage (Demir and Suğur 1999; Çam 1999, 2002). Second, as subcontracting and outsourcing became important as a viable and highly favored management strategy, employment in big, modern enterprises ceased to be a possibility for the overwhelming majority of workers.

The Turkish labor market is today characterized by the importance of small enterprises and informal employment. Workplaces that use one to forty-nine people count for approximately 85 percent of the total employment (TURKSTAT 2006a). Although these enterprises are formally registered, some of them may use workers who are not protected by social security. As to the dimensions of the informal sector, it is estimated that about 50 percent of the total workforce and one-third of the workers in the urban sector are informally employed (World Bank 2004, iii). However, the diversity that characterizes the Turkish workforce cannot be reduced to the dichotomy between the modern formal sector on the one hand and small enterprises and the informal sector on the other. Such a classification would fail to take into account the heterogeneity within these sectors (Şenses 1994, 407–8) and it would overlook the extent to which they are interconnected through subcontracting practices (Güler-Müftüoğlu 2000; Özatalay 2006; Akdemir 2007).

Given these legal, ideological, and economic aspects of the environment in which Turkish labor unions operate, it would not be surprising to see a sustained decline in union density. Unfortunately, both the keenness of unions to show that they meet threshold requirements and the reluctance of the Ministry of Labor and Social Security to reveal the extent to which labor is unorganized tend to grossly exaggerate the membership figures. Çelik and Lordoğlu (2006) discuss the unreliability of these official figures and they make a serious attempt to calculate the percentage of formal sector employees that benefit from collective agreements. They come up with a figure of 18.3 percent for 2004, down from 46.9 percent in 1985 (Çelik and Lordoğlu 2006, 20).[11] These figures, which only pertain to wage earners under formal social security protection, clearly reveal how marginalized the unionized workers are in a country where about half of all workers are employed in the informal sector.

In the following, we will discuss how this marginalization manifests itself in the truly different worlds of labor and how the characteristics of the hostile environment in which unions struggle to survive prevent them from adopting organizational strategies targeting the working population at large.

Table 2
Unemployment Experience for more than Six Months and the Expectation to Find a Job in Three Months in Case of Unemployment (n = 1,245)

Unemployment Experience for More than Six Months (%)		In Case of Unemployment, Expectation to Find a Job in Three Months (%)	
Yes	54	Yes	26
No	46	No	74

	% of Those Who Said Yes (Normalized)	% of Those Who Said No (Normalized)
Status		
Unionized	39	84
Formal but not union	51	70
Informal	54	55
Sector		
Textile	43	67
Automotive	33	68
Chemistry	32	82
Food	43	70
Mining	57	73
Municipality	63	80

Different Worlds of Labor: Results from the Survey Study

The results of our study confirm the seriousness of the problem of unemployment. The majority of the workers who answered our questionnaire survey thought that unemployment constitutes the most important problem in the country (57 percent ranking unemployment as the first important problem and an additional 20 percent as the second important one), much more important than problems such as high cost of living, economic instability, inequality of income distribution, or corruption. This is understandable, considering the fact that more than half of our respondents had in fact been unemployed for over six months and, what is equally telling, almost three-quarters of them did not think that in the case of unemployment they would be able to find a job in the following three months (see Table 2).

Concerning the experience and the fear of unemployment, we further observe in Table 2 a differentiation among three types of workers covered in our study as well as variations between different sectors. The experience of unemployment is more common among informal sector workers with no social security, a little less common for workers under social security coverage but not unionized, and least common for unionized workers. We find the same differentiation reflected in expectations about finding a job in three months in case of unemployment, but it is now in the opposite

Table 3
Average Monthly Net Income and Average Weekly Working Hours (n = 1,245)

	Average Monthly Net Income (€) (Standard Deviation in Parenthesis)	Average Weekly Hours (Standard Deviation in Parenthesis)
Status		
Unionized	496.9 (248.9)	49 (10)
Formal but not union	247.3 (109.9)	55 (11)
Informal	223.7 (86.8)	59 (16)
Sector		
Textile	259.6 (119.8)	57 (13)
Automotive	351.7 (197.8)	54 (11)
Chemistry	379.2 (314.8)	51 (13)
Food	352.9 (161.5)	56 (14)
Mining	513.2 (289.6)	48 (4)
Municipality	342.7 (159.9)	51 (16)

Note: € =1.81 YTL as of July–August 2004 (on average).

direction. This is not surprising because a unionized worker with a decent job is less likely to find a comparable job than other workers, especially informal sector ones, who, if unemployed, have more prospects to find a job similar to the less decent jobs they currently hold.[12]

Labor market segmentation is also observed in relation to other issues, such as average monthly wages and weekly working hours (see Table 3). As the table shows, average monthly wages (not adjusted with purchasing power parity [PPP]) of unionized workers are double those of nonunionized formal sector workers and more than double those of informal sector workers.[13] This picture should be evaluated along with the information on working hours. In fact, working hours are extremely long in Turkey. This is not only documented by our study but is also confirmed by a World Bank study (2004, ix) based on a representative sample of workers. As seen in Table 3, even unionized workers have a very long work week of forty-nine hours, but average weekly working hours reach fifty-nine for informal sector workers.[14]

Turkish workers do not only work for extremely long hours but also experience difficulties in getting paid on time. In their answer to the question "Do you always get paid on time?" the differentiation between our three groups of workers becomes especially clear here, with 88 percent of unionized workers saying that they are always paid on time, compared with 60 percent for the nonunionized formal sector workers and only 57 percent of informally employed ones.

The differentiation among workers extends beyond wages and working conditions, and assumes a character which enables us to talk about certainly two and possibly three different worlds of labor. Our survey results show, for example, that 30 percent of the unionized workers had taken a vacation away from home during the last two years,

which is actually quite low; but the figure further falls to 17 percent for nonunionized formal sector workers and to 12 percent for informally employed ones. We further observe from our results that whereas 48 percent of unionized workers have a high school or above degree, this goes down to 35 percent for nonunionized formal sector workers and to 27 percent for informally employed ones. Similarly, the average age of unionized workers is thirty-five and those of nonunionized formal sector workers and informally employed ones are twenty-nine and twenty-seven respectively, and the average year of work on the same workplace for unionized workers is ten and those of nonunionized formal sector workers and informally employed ones are four and three respectively. Thus, on average, the typical unionized worker is more educated and older and has a lower turnover rate compared with the rest.

All in all, we observe that differentiation between unionized workers and others is much greater than the differentiation between formal sector nonunionized workers and those in the informal employment. It should also be mentioned that these different groups of workers not only have unequal incomes, working conditions and personal characteristics, but also seem to be unequal vis-à-vis the personal support mechanisms available to them. Our survey results show that a larger percentage of unionized workers (17 percent) received in kind or in cash support from their families in the village of origin than others (10 percent), indicating, probably, the way reciprocity relations work with those who are less well-off, unable to help their relatives to any significant degree and therefore getting less in return, compared to better-off workers.

Consequently, it is not surprising that the levels of general life as well as work satisfaction (both measured on a 0–10 scale, 0 being *not satisfied at all* and 10 *very satisfied*) for unionized workers appear to be higher than those of the remaining workers (see Table 4).[15]

Labor Unions Vis-à-Vis Different Worlds of Labor

This picture that shows the existence of different worlds of labor, whereby the working conditions of unionized workers are clearly far superior to those of the rest, might be interpreted as a reflection of the success of unions in improving the circumstances of their members. It would not, however, be very rational for unions to congratulate themselves on this state of affairs since it is highly doubtful that a shrinking island of privileged union members in a vast sea of underprivileged workers could be sustainable. Unless they make a serious effort to improve the circumstances of all workers, to combat, in particular, informal employment practices, the highly negative public attitude toward the unions which we have discussed in the first section would be further accentuated and it would be easier for employers to present unionized workers as a labor aristocracy that does not share the concerns of the rest of the workforce. This would make it impossible for unions to consolidate their basis of social legitimacy, which they need to do to be able to lead a public campaign against certain

Table 4
General and Work Satisfaction Levels (n = 1,245)

	General Satisfaction Level (0-10)	Work Satisfaction Level (0-10)
Status		
Unionized	6.7	6.5
Formal but not union	5.1	5.3
Informal	4.6	4.7
Sector		
Textile	4.9	5.3
Automotive	6.1	6.7
Chemistry	6.3	6.7
Food	6.0	6.3
Mining	6.0	5.0
Municipality	3.7	4.6

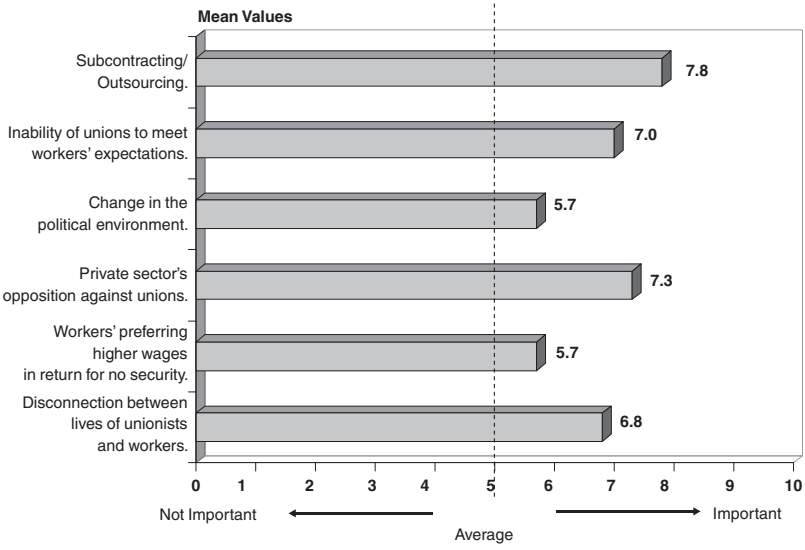
problems that lead both to a deterioration of labor standards and to the decline in union density.

One of these problems has to do with the management practices that involve an abuse of outsourcing and subcontracting. In fact, the workers who answered our questionnaire and those who participated in the focus group meetings, as well as union representatives that we interviewed, all thought that subcontracting practices constitute the most important reason behind the weakness of unions. This is clearly shown by Figure 2, which presents the responses given to our survey question on the reasons behind the weakness of unions (closed answers; on a 0–10 scale, 0 being *not important at all* and 10 *very important*). As the figure shows, the second most important reason concerns the hostile attitude of the private sector to unions.[16] In fact, many workers and union representatives believe that outsourcing and subcontracting practices constitute part of a management strategy to limit unionisation.[17] The two most important reasons (which are statistically apart from other answers) can indeed be seen as representing the two sides of the same coin—the hostility of the business.

In fact, many of the unionized workers who answered our questionnaire survey indicated that their enterprise has recently subcontracted some of the activities previously carried out within the enterprise (see Figure 3). Predictably, the rate of response to this question falls considerably in the case of nonunionized workers. The subcontractors are likely to be enterprises that employ nonunionized and in general less-protected workers. We have seen the implications of this situation for workers most clearly in municipal services, where local governments often deal with subcontractors, closing their eyes to informal employment practices and widespread violations of labor standards.

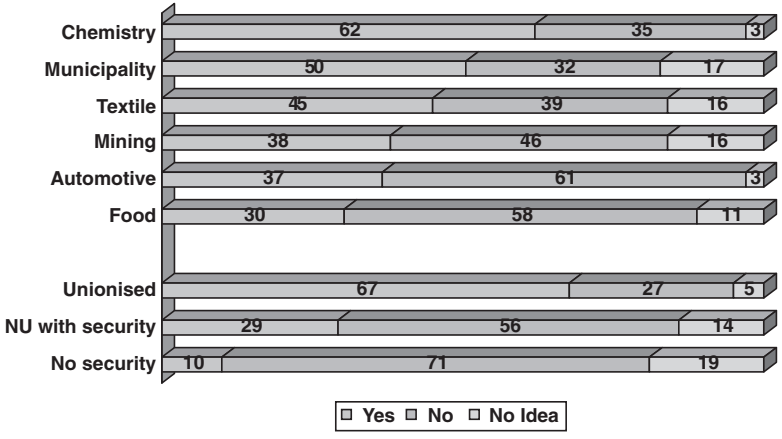
Big enterprises cannot legally prevent unionisation and public relations concerns often check an overtly hostile management strategy against unions. Under these circumstances, big business firms often adopt a seemingly tolerant attitude toward organized labor, which they seek to limit to a small segment of the total workforce

Figure 2
Reasons behind Unions' Increased Weakness



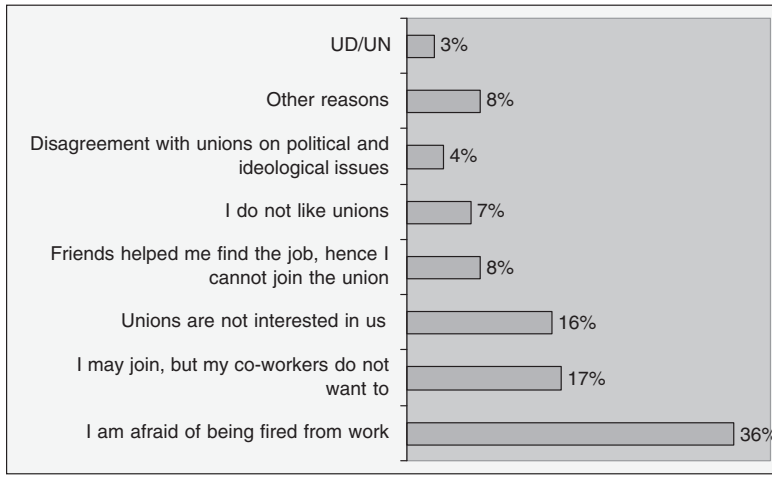
Note: n = 1,245

Figure 3
New Subcontracting Activities in the Enterprise



Note: n = 1,245

Figure 4
Reasons for Not Becoming a Union Member



Note: Formal but nonunionized $n = 319$. Closed answers for the first and second reasons. Answers are weighted (1 for the first and 0.5 for the second) and normalized.

that they employ by a particularly ingenious way of using subcontracting. They might establish different companies, sometimes operating within the same plant, and thus separate workers covered by collective bargaining agreements from others. We have clearly seen examples of this practice in different sectors in Turkey, where the differences between unionized workers and others prevailed within the same establishment. In fact, during our field research, the Adana branch of the Türk-İş affiliated union in petrochemicals had two court cases going against such management practices, but the union leader did not seem very hopeful about winning these cases.

To fight against such circumventing of law and to prevent the abuse of subcontracting practices to weaken the power of organized labor, unions need to gain the support of the public opinion. They also need public support against the common management practice to fire workers that show any interest in becoming a union member. As Figure 4 shows, the fear of being fired in fact constitutes the most important (and statistically different) reason for formal sector workers' reluctance to become a union member—a result which can be interpreted as the corollary of the answers given to the weakness of unions in our previous figure. As to informal sector workers, union membership seems to be well out of the horizon of their expectations.

When unions try to attract attention to such management practices, including the use of informal labor, they are silenced, as indicated before, by management-led arguments against their lack of interest for the problems of nonunion members who are only too happy to find a job in a context characterized by high unemployment. It

is in fact true that unions do not try to solve the problems of those workers outside their constituency. It is telling that a not insignificant number of workers expressed their dissatisfaction that unions did not pay attention to their willingness to get unionized. They are not concerned, in particular, with the working conditions in small and medium enterprises that have a very high share in total employment. As they have to bear the fixed costs of getting organized in new workplaces, they would rather have a tendency not to choose small-scale ones. Yet, it is in these small enterprises that most of the violations of social standards occur.

Is there anything that the unions could do about these violations and other problems faced by the overwhelming majority of workers in the country? Within the context of the "service model" of unionism, limited to a transactional relation between workers who pay their dues to the union bureaucracy in exchange for services delivered, the response to this question might be negative. However, in adopting the "organizational model," which involves the empowerment of workers to enable them to find collective solutions to their problems, the scope for action might be larger (ILO 1999, 34–5). Apart from their contribution to organizing strategies that involve atypical workers, unions might have an "external program" consisting of demands directed at public authorities, employers and international organizations (Gallin 2001, 541–2). Such demands would include all the problems stemming from the existing legislation and its application that define the insecurity of employment and income, unacceptably long working hours and unhealthy working conditions that affect the majority of workers in the country. Adopting such an external program, the unions could also attract the attention of the general public to a wide set of social problems which, for the moment, remain largely hidden for lack of effective channels of expression. It is clear that the tasks involved in both types of strategies fall into the domain of expertise of unions and the unions are better situated than any other social actor to undertake these tasks.

The fact that the latter remains marginal to the agenda the unions set for themselves could simply be attributed to a myopic strategy. However, it is not only simplicity, short-sightedness or laziness, but also several serious institutional reasons, reflecting the nature of the existing legislation, which explain the silence of unions in the face of the problems that concern nonunionized workers. Most significantly, unions in Turkey have a very precarious existence because of the very high threshold requirements to obtain the right to represent workers in collective agreements. The extent of this precariousness is clearly revealed by the statistics provided by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, which indicate that of the forty-nine labor unions that meet threshold requirements, the members of twenty constitute between 10 and 15 percent of all the workers in the relevant sector (Çelik 2004). This indicates how important it is for the unions to maintain, at all cost, their membership base and how the consciousness of this fact is likely to discourage them from allocating their time, energy, and financial resources to strategies directed at the organization of atypical workers, especially since such strategies would necessarily imply confrontation with the management.

As the confederation leader of DİSK openly stated at the conference we organized to share our research findings with union representatives,[18] even these statistics overestimate the actual membership figures and in reality very few unions could actually fulfill the legal threshold requirement. He added that it is generally known that some of the unions who were active could easily be prevented from participating in the collective bargaining process if the membership figures were controlled through serious inspection procedures. This type of serious inspection is not carried out because "it would not look good" if many unions were eliminated from the scene of industrial relations, especially in the context of Turkey's relations with the EU when the *Progress Reports* repeatedly underline the failure of the country to comply with European standards in industrial relations. Such concerns bring at least a partial explanation to the overestimation of union density by official statistics, which we have mentioned in the first section. As the leader of DİSK put it, unions are tolerated but condemned to a precarious existence, by the government and by the enterprise management.

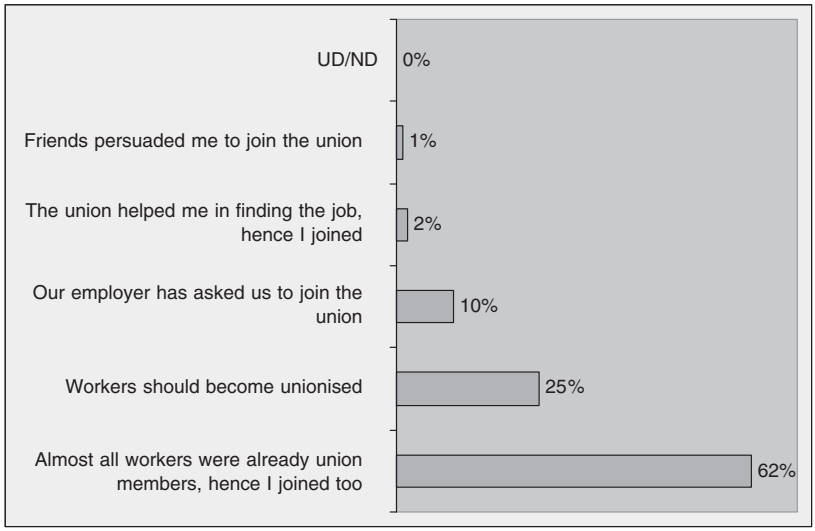
Some managers would even bargain with union leaders by allowing them to unionize a limited number of workers in the enterprise on condition that they leave the rest alone. Our study, in fact, has an interesting finding to that effect. To the question about the reason behind their decision to become union members, 10 percent of the unionized members in our sample answered that they had become union members by the decision of the employer (see Figure 5). They were, in other words, among the group "allocated" to unions through the bargaining process between unions and the management. We have also encountered several examples of this type of union membership in our focus group meetings.

Conclusion

This discussion on labor and labor organizations in Turkey contributes to the existing literature that highlights the significance of innovative union strategies directed at expanding membership in a way to include atypical workers to resist union decline in its different dimensions. It also points, however, to the reasons why such strategies might not be forthcoming where they are especially needed. Where unions have a precarious existence, the expansion of the membership base could be the only way to gain legitimacy and power. Yet, it is precisely their precarious existence that might condemn unions to a myopic strategy, leading them to concentrate on the interests of their limited membership which they try to maintain at all cost. Ignoring the problems of the rest of the workforce that live in a truly separate world, they undermine their own legitimacy, hence their ability to mobilize public opinion against the limiting legislation that explains, at least in part, their short-sightedness.

Whether this vicious cycle could be broken or not depends, among other things, on how unions perceive the intensity of the pressures under which they operate. In

Figure 5
Reasons behind Joining the Union



Note: $n = 620$. Closed answers.

Turkey, the difficulties that lead to union decline are indeed quite severe. Yet, even under such difficult circumstances, it is impossible to say that the scope for strategic choice is too limited to allow for a course of action different from the one actually taken. The current political environment is such that neither the state nor big enterprise owners could afford to engage in strategies that would eliminate unions from the social scene. This indeed is a "ladder" that unions in Turkey could use by risking the uncomfortable situation in which they survive, tolerated as representatives of the few but not allowed to raise their voices in defence of the majority. Even documenting the cases of violations of social rights of informal sector workers and the latter's truly unacceptable working conditions could constitute a positive step toward a more viable strategy. For the moment, we can only hope that the labor unions will, at some point, reach the conclusion that this is a risk that could and should be taken.

Notes

1. The 2007 ILO Brief on *Global Employment Trends* (ILO 2007) shows that during the ten-year period between 1996 and 2006 the world economy grew at an average annual rate of 4.1 percent. In the same period, unemployment in the world increased from 161.4 million to 195.2 million, with a slight decline from 66.7 to 65.5 percent in labor force participation rate.

2. According to one such estimation, employment outside the formal sector reaches 80 percent of total employment in low income countries, 40 percent in middle income countries and 15 percent in high income ones (Gallin 2001, 535).

3. For a general discussion around "Can Labor Standards Improve under Globalization?" by Elliott and Freeman (2003), see "Labor History Symposium," *Labor History* 45 (2004): 497–535.

4. See Law n. 2821 on Labor Unions of 05.05.1983 and Law n. 2822 on Collective Bargaining, Strike and Lock-out of 05.05.1983.

5. Law n. 4688 on Public Sector Workers of 25.06.2001.

6. Labor Law n. 4857 of 22.05.2003.

7. The government action in question was criticized in the *2004 EU Progress Report on Turkey* (European Commission 2004, 47) as an example of the still significant problems of the legal context of industrial relations in Turkey.

8. The decline of automotive exports caused by labor unrest was often discussed in relation to the growing trade deficit: See, for example, "İhracatın Yıldızı Otomotiv Lastik Grevinden Endişeli" (Automotive, the Shooting Star of the Export Sector is Worried about a Strike in the Tire Industry), *Milliyet,* March 22, 2004. See also D. Gökçe, "Şişecam Grevi Verileri" (Facts about the Strike in Glass Industry), *Akşam,* March 9, 2004; and E. Cansen, "Tekelci Sendikacılığın Ücret Rantı" (The Wage Rents [sic] of the Union Monopoly), *Hürriyet,* March 6, 2004.

9. One particular incident that involved a true story of corruption extensively used by the media to discredit union leadership concerns the leader of the Miners' Union affiliated with Türk-İş, Şemsi Denizer, who had become a working class hero for the role he played during the miners' strike and massive demonstrations organized around it in the beginning of 1991. Yet, the extensive media coverage later received by his decision to use union funds to buy a luxury car, a Jaguar more specifically, for his use as the union leader has effectively destroyed his reputation and he has come to be publicly known as "Şemsi the Jaguar." (See, for example, the column by M. Demirci, *Aksiyon,* August 14, 1999.) While the story was not false, the eagerness of the media to exploit it along with similar less spectacular stories was clearly situated in an ideological environment hostile to organized labor and was aimed at contributing to that environment. A good example of the position of the media vis-à-vis labor unions is constituted by two successive interviews, clearly designed to denigrate unions, conducted by a journalist who otherwise has no interest in labor issues: the interviews by Neşe Düzel, "Ankara'da Kıyamet Koparan Yasa" (The Legislation that Shook Ankara), *Radikal,* November, 22, 2004 and "Sendikalarda Trilyonlar Dönüyor" (Trillions Commanded by Unions), *Radikal,* December, 6, 2004.

10. According to official statistics, between April 2004 and April 2005, nonagricultural employment increased by 926,000 while the increase in the working age population was 957,000. The difference between the two figures would not, in itself, translate into the current dimensions of the employment problem. There was, however, an important decline in agricultural employment, with 747,000 workers leaving the agricultural sector in the period in question (TUIK 2006).

11. In the *2003 Progress Report on Turkey* of the European Commission (2003, 87), it is stated that "[t]he percentage of the labor force covered by collective bargaining is extremely low. It is estimated to be below 15 percent."

12. Multivariate logistic regressions are conducted, where, along with the status of workers, the attributes of education, sector, and age are used as explanatory variables in explaining the experience and the fear of unemployment. The results indicate, first, a statistically significant difference between unionized and nonunionized workers on the question of experience of unemployment and, secondly, a statistically significant difference among three types of workers on the question of fear of unemployment.

13. An interesting and somewhat predictable finding deserves attention: when we look at not the individual but the household income, we observe that the sharp distinction between unionized and nonunionized workers soften to some extent, suggesting that on average more people in nonunionized workers' families share the burden of earning their daily bread.

14. Multivariate OLS regression are conducted, where, along with the status of workers, the attributes of education, sector, and age are used as explanatory variables in explaining the average monthly wages

and the average weekly working hours. Both in average monthly wages and the average weekly working hours a statistically significant difference is observed between unionized and nonunionized workers.

15. Multivariate OLS regression are conducted, where, along with the status of workers, the attributes of education, sector, and age are used as explanatory variables in explaining the satisfaction levels. Both in general and workplace satisfaction levels, a statistically significant difference is observed between unionized and nonunionized workers.

16. Note that the three typologies do not make any significant differentiation when these two answers are considered. Of the remaining answers, formal and nonunion workers give considerably less (though not statistically significant) importance to changes in the political environment, and informal ones give considerably more (though not statistically significant) importance to choice of higher wages in return of no security.

17. The results of the audits on labor standards commissioned by European retailers show that most important violations of labor standards in Turkey are found in three areas: working hours, overtime work, and management practices that include the abuse of subcontracting and outsourcing in a way to enable suppliers to European firms to circumvent the requirements of the latter concerning social standards. These results were presented by Jan Eggert, from the Business Social Compliance Initiative, at Turkey's 11th Roundtable on Social Standards in the Textile Industry, Ankara, March 29–30, 2006.

18. Galatasaray University, Istanbul, April 16, 2005.

References

Adaman, Fikret, Ali Çarkoğlu, and Burhan Şenatalar. 2001. *Halkın gözünden Türkiye'de yolsuzlugun nedenleri ve önlenmesine ilişkin öneriler*. İstanbul: TESEV.

———. 2005. *Toplumun kamu yönetimine, kamu hizmetlerine ve reforma bakışı*. İstanbul: TESEV.

Akdemir, Nevra. 2007. Emek süreçlerinde taşeronluk ve Tuzla Tersaneler Bölgesi örneği. *Praxis* 16:143–70.

Arrighi, Giovanni. 1994. *The long twentieth century*. London: Verso.

Beneria, Lourdes. 2001. *Changing employment patterns and the informalization of jobs: General trends and gender dimensions*. Geneva: International Labor Office.

Çam, Sürhan. 1999. Job security, unionisation, wages and privatisation: A case study in the Turkish cement industry. *The Sociological Review* 47:695–714.

———. 2002. Neo-liberalism and labor within the context of an "emerging market" economy—Turkey. *Capital and Class* 77:89–114.

Çelik, Aziz. 2004. Türkiye'de sendika üyeliği ve sendikalaşma istatistikleri. http://www.sendika.org/yazi.php?yazi_no=749.

Çelik, Aziz, and Kuvvet Lordoğlu. 2006. Türkiye'de resmi sendikalaşma istatistiklerinin sorunları üstüne. *Çalışma ve Toplum* 2:11–30.

Crouch, Colin. 2000. The snakes and ladders of twenty-first century trade unionism. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 16:70–83.

Demir, Erol, and Nadir Suğur. 1999. Özelleştirme sonrası çimento sanayiinde işgücü kullanımı ve esnek istihdam. *Mülkiyeliler Birliği Dergisi* 23:162–81.

Elliott, Kimberly Ann, and Richard B. Freeman. 2003. *Can labor standards improve under globalization?* Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics.

European Commission. 2001. *2001 Regular report from the Commission on Turkey's Progress toward Accession*. Brussels: European Commission.

———. 2002. *2002 Regular report from the Commission on Turkey's Progress toward Accession*. Brussels: European Commission.

———. 2003. *2003 Regular report from the Commission on Turkey's Progress toward Accession*. Brussels: European Commission.

———. 2004. *2004 Regular report from the Commission on Turkey's Progress toward Accession*. Brussels: European Commission.
———. 2005. *2005 Regular report from the Commission on Turkey's Progress toward Accession*. Brussels: European Commission.
———. 2006. *2006 Regular report from the Commission on Turkey's Progress toward Accession*. Brussels: European Commission.
Frege, Carola M., and Jon Kelly, eds. 2004. *Varieties of unionism: Strategies for union revitalization in a globalizing economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Gallin, Dan. 2001. Propositions on trade unions and informal employment in times of globalisation. *Antipode* 33:531–49.
Güler-Müftüoğlu, Berna. 2000. İstanbul Gedikpaşa'da ayakkabı üretiminin değişen yapısı ve farklılaşan işgücü. *Toplum ve Bilim* 86:118–38.
Heery, Edmund, and Lee Adler. 2004. Organizing the unorganized. In *Varieties of unionism: Strategies for union revitalization in a globalizing economy*, edited by C. M. Frege and J. Kelly, 45–70. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
ILO. 1999. Trade unions and the informal sector: Towards a comprehensive strategy. Background paper prepared by the Bureau for Workers' Activities of the ILO for the Symposium on Trade Unions and the Informal Sector: Towards a Comprehensive Strategy. Geneva, October 1999.
———. 2007. Brief on global employment trends. http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/strat/download/getb07en.pdf
Iranzo, Consuelo, and Thanali Patruyo. 2002. Trade unionism and globalization: Thoughts from Latin America. *Current Sociology* 50:57–74.
Lash, Scott, and Gordon Urry. 1987. *The end of organized capitalism*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
Munck, Ronaldo. 2002. *Globalisation and labor*. London and New York: Zed Books.
Nichols, Theo, and Nadir Suğur. 2004. *Global management and local labor: Turkish workers and modern industry*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
Özatalay, Cem. 2006. Elmanın öteki yarısı: Enformel sektör işçileri. *TES-İŞ Dergisi* June: 57–62.
Silver, Beverly. 2003. *Forces of labor*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
Şenses, Fikret. 1994. Labor market response to structural adjustment and institutional pressures: The Turkish case. *METU Studies in Development* 21:405–49.
TUIK. 2006. TUIK haber bülteni. 19. www.tuik.gov.tr. July 20.
TURKSTAT. 2006a. Labor statistics. www.tuik.gov.tr.
TURKSTAT. 2006b. Household labor force survey. www.tuik.gov.tr.
Waterman, Peter. 2005. Labor and new social movements in a globalising world system: The future of the past. *Labor History* 46:195–207.
World Bank. 2004. *Turkey: Labor market study*. Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Unit, Europe and Central Asia Region.

Fikret Adaman, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Economics at Boğaziçi University. His research interests are in the fields of political economy and ecological economics.

Ayşe Buğra, PhD, teaches at the Ataturk Institute of Modern Turkish History at Boğaziçi University and she is one of the founding directors of the research center Social Policy Forum based at the same university.

Ahmet İnsel, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Economics at Galatasaray University. His research interests are in the fields of development and institutional economics.