

Section 6. Border Crossed

Can Kaya

Chapter 13. Refugees unwelcome: EU-Turkey deal on migration



Pazarkule, Turkey-Greece border, March 2020. Photo: Murat Bay.

A masked group raided Syrian refugees' house in Istanbul. Nail Alnaif was stabbed to death while sleeping.

In Izmir, the house of Syrian workers was set on fire at midnight, and the three workers were burned to death.

A mob was organised against the Syrian neighbourhood in Ankara. Syrians' homes and workplaces were plundered.

22 migrants were beaten and pushed into the Maritsa River by Greek soldiers after their clothes were taken. 19 of them froze to death.

The refugee crisis in Turkey is getting worse with new influxes. Even though the migration wave to Turkey started much earlier, it reached a peak with the Syrian civil war in 2015 and became visible again with the Afghan

mobilisation last year. According to the UN's International Organisation for Migration, Turkey is the largest host country in the world, with more than 3.6 million refugees, mainly Syrians (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou, 2021: 46). The number increases when we take undocumented and irregular migrants into account.

At the beginning of the crisis, Turkey adopted the Temporary Protection Regulation (TPR), allowing refugees to reside and work, rather than a refugee status in 2016. However, migrants entering the country illegally are not entitled to this protection status since they are undocumented. A small number of TPR holders have had a chance to find a formal job and make at least minimum wage, with some restrictions; for example, the job permit process must be carried out by the employer, and the number of Syrian workers cannot exceed 10% of the total number of employees in the workplace. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of undocumented migrants receive a fraction of the minimum wage and have no access to social rights, including health and education (Tören, 2018). According to the ILO, Syrian workers earn around 30% less than local workers, although they work longer hours (ILO, 2021). Turkey's migration policy created the cheapest labour market on the edge of Europe.

The fact that trade unions cannot access the informal sectors aggravates the situation further. Migrant workers are mostly out of the scope of trade unions as they are primarily employed in the informal sectors. In many cases, migrant workers are not paid for their work, they are employed illicitly, may be victims of occupational murders, and are exposed to racist violence and sexual harassment. In addition, as the government holds the threat of deportation against them, migrants facing these violations avoid organising themselves or complaining to the legal authorities.

The migrant crisis has also coincided with an economic crisis arising from the devaluation of the Turkish Lira since 2018. As poverty and the unemployment rate in the country increased, the anti-immigrant agenda of the right-wing began to draw more attention. Similar to other countries, the migration crisis split the labour class into two camps. Many people blame migrants for stealing their jobs and leading an economic crisis. It posed a challenge to trade unions to react to migrant workers' conditions since their members were divided among themselves. This sharp contrast is also a vulnerability of trade unions that the government constantly exploits.

The negotiations on migrants' lives

The mass influx of Syrian refugees in 2015 sparked one of the European Union's biggest-ever political crises. Almost one million migrants entered the EU in that year. The EU's solution to this crisis was to offer Turkey six billion euros in exchange for preventing migrants from leaving the country and taking back every irregular migrant who entered Greece. The EU-Turkey migration deal was struck in March 2016, which also foresaw reducing visa restrictions for Turkish citizens, an update to the customs union agreement and revitalising negotiations about Turkey's accession to the European Union. The deal aimed to reduce the pressure on EU borders and dissuade potential migration movements to Europe. A 2020 European Commission statement noted that number of irregular migrants arriving on Greek islands plunged 94% after the deal went into force.

By this agreement, it is accepted that Turkey is not a part of the EU but its border. Moreover, it serves to legitimate a labour hell, where millions of people make less than the minimum wage and have no access to social rights, and where even child and forced labour exist.

The six billion euros was paid to Turkey by the end of 2020. In addition, a new aid package of three billion euros was endorsed by EU countries in 2021, although the Turkish government is reluctant to make clear where this money is being spent. The EU does not hesitate to fund authoritarian regimes when it comes to its border security issues. This deal also shows that the EU politically recognises Erdogan's way of ruling the country.

The EU's readiness to pay any price to keep migrants away from its territory also creates a flaw that authoritarian regimes can exploit. For example, in Turkey, thousands of migrants were sent to towns near the Greek border in March 2020, following a government-rooted rumour that the border would open. As a result, thousands of people tried to enter Greece and faced the violence of Greek border forces. The EU's policy of outsourcing its border security to authoritarian regimes is becoming a pattern, as we saw in the clashes on the Belarus-Poland border. The Turkish government has begun exporting its inhumane methods to other authoritarian regimes to blackmail Europe. The humanity crises that occur on the EU's borders are the consequences of its migration policy allowing authoritarian regimes to instrumentalize people. It must also be noted that migrants captured by the Greek forces after they managed to pass the border were beaten and pushed into the Maritsa River after their clothes were taken during the freezing cold. The silence of the EU justifies the despicable methods used to ensure border security on both sides of the border. Therefore, it was not surprising to see the same violence in Poland last year.

A solidarity-based solution

The EU-TR migration agreement has hampered the labour movement in the country and brought nothing but misery to migrant workers in Turkey. As the European Trade Union Confederation, ETUC (2020), called for, the deal must be terminated immediately, and a new migration policy based on human rights, equal responsibility and fair distribution must be established. Migration must be recognised as a core human right, and an EU safe humanitarian corridor should be put in place. Furthermore, the EU should organise the reception of migrants, support them in applying for asylum and relocate them among the EU member states. Turkey's migrant crisis is not only Turkey's problem anymore. Such an authoritarian regime and cheap labour market will also undermine European workers' conditions. Turkey's economic growth strategy through competitive currency rates, cheap labour and non-unionised workplaces may cause a massive investment exodus from Europe, and the fear that 'migrants will steal our jobs' may come true in another way.

It is a fact that a large number of migrants have settled in Turkey in the past years. While Turkey was a transit country for people to reach Europe, it has become the final destination due to effective border control. The number of Syrian babies born in Turkey who have never seen Syria exceeds 600 000 (Akdeniz, 2021). Since migrant people have become a significant part of society, any solution must foresee not only their redistribution but also an integration process. They must benefit from education and health services equally and access the labour market under fair conditions. The Turkish government must be forced to provide stable and secure refugee status to the migrants instead of temporary protection that can be revoked at any time. The EU must take responsibility for repairing the destruction stemming from the deal. The allocation of EU funds and EU-Turkey trade agreements can be practical tools to address the situation. An adequate supervision and sanction mechanism can be initial steps against Turkish suppliers of the EU companies that use migrant labour and exploit them. Respect for the right to collective bargaining and the right to organise must be made essential for these suppliers. Further cooperation between European and Turkish trade unions may help mobilise workers in these companies.

Although the European trade unions and trade union federations developed a progressive attitude to the crisis at the beginning, their actions were eventually far below their capacity. The polarisation among members of the Turkish trade unions can be observed on their ground as well. For sure, there is no easy solution for this. However, the hesitancy in the Euro-

pean labour movement may bring more severe devastation to the continent. Unless the European trade unions take a proactive stand on this issue, a significant field in terms of labour rights will be abandoned to the extreme right's anti-migrant propaganda.

The world is not the old world anymore, but the old slogans are still shining the light on the way we need to walk. The labour movement can only find its way through this darkness with international solidarity.

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