

The Ottoman-Turkish Labour Movement and International Solidarity: A Hundred Years Ago, A Hundred Years Later

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Introduction

The debate about ‘globalisation’ has been one of the most popular, heated and multi-faceted debates of social sciences in the last twenty years. The issues at hand range from whether there is such a thing, to the dynamics behind it, or from whether it had made poor countries better off, to the ways to oppose it. Without going into detail about these debates, it is necessary to state this paper’s general notion of globalisation. To put it very roughly, ‘globalisation’ in this paper means not an irreversible trend the dynamics of which is based on technological development, but a project designed and imposed within the framework of overcoming the crisis of capitalism that has been in place since the 1970s.¹

Seeing globalisation as a project rather than an almost natural process means that the challenges and problems it creates for labour can at least theoretically be opposed and eliminated. The struggle to do this can be organized on three scales, global, nation-state, and local. One of the consequences of the advances of the globalisation project is a pressure on the working class to confine itself to the local scale. As the nation-states are under pressure to give up most of their regulatory and restrictive policies, the working-class is left with no choice but to confine struggle and opposition to the local level. This strategy is, however, by no means the appropriate one for labour.² The other two scales, namely the nation-state and the global, are still essential for working class if the trends of globalisation are to be reversed. Through decades of struggle, the working class secured important gains on the nation-state level. These gains are crucial and should be defended against international capital’s attacks. The global scale is, on the other hand, the ‘natural’ scale of working class. Labour’s horizons should never be limited to the nation-state level. In this context, international solidarity means, or shall mean, an attempt on the part of the labour to carry the struggle to its ‘natural’ level, while sticking to rewards secured on the national level. Put as such, international solidarity has always been crucial for labourers all over the world. During some periods, however, its importance increases even further. The situation that we face now, and the one roughly a hundred years ago, are among those periods. The challenges to labour that these periods entail render the ties of international solidarity even more crucial.

¹ Tarik Sengul, “Siyaset ve Mekansal Olcek Sorunu: Yerelci Stratejilerin Bir Elestirisi” in E. Ahmet Tonak (ed.), *Kuresellesme. Emperyalizm, Yerelcilik, Isci Sinifi* (Ankara: Imge, 2000)

² Ibid.

In this context, the goal of this paper is to look at what role did international solidarity played and is playing in Ottoman-Turkish workers' responses to these challenges. It will basically discuss the intensity and various forms of international solidarity observed in the ranks of Ottoman workers during 1900s and Turkish workers during the last twenty years.

Ottoman Labour Movement and International Solidarity

Methodological Problems

The study of Ottoman labour movement, particularly in terms of international ties of solidarity, necessarily involves some serious methodological problems. The Ottoman Empire was a multi-ethnic entity, and its large territories were home to a wide variety of languages, religions, and ethnicities. Given such a structure, there could be two positions regarding the study of the international ties of the Ottoman labour movement.

From a certain perspective, despite the multi-ethnic structure of the Empire, the fact that all workers in question were subjects of the same state necessitates that the scholar treats them as a single entity. Thus, the relations between Ottoman workers of different ethnic origins cannot be included into the framework of international solidarity. Only the relations between Ottoman workers, which are treated as a single entity, and workers from other countries could count as international ties. This perspective has an apparent advantage in Ottoman labour studies. It eliminates a major methodological problem, namely anachronism. In Ottoman historiography, anachronism is by no means a rarity. This is largely due to the historical conditions under which this scholarship emerged and developed. A great deal of Ottomanist historical literature has its origins in the successor states of the Ottoman Empire (virtually all Balkan states, Turkey, and most Arab states) and scholars in these countries have tended to see the Empire through their nation-state glasses. As a result, Turkey has been regarded as *the* successor state of the Ottoman Empire. Similarly, the non-Turkish or non-Muslim elements within the Empire have 'become' minorities in the contemporary, 'nation-state' sense of the term. This is not to say that there was difference in status or standing between different ethnic groups; nor was the Empire a heaven of tolerance. There were, to be sure, important social, and especially until the reform program launched in 1839, political and judicial differences between ethnic groups. Yet, these differences do not justify the anachronistic tone that could be found in the literature. To sum up, from this perspective, the multi-ethnic structure of the Empire prevents the historian from considering the relations among Ottoman workers of different origins as a part of the framework of international solidarity.

Convincing as this approach is, it can be criticised forcefully. During the period in question, the Ottoman Empire was in constant turmoil. In the course of the nineteenth century many successful and failed nationalist uprisings shook the Ottoman lands. The territories rapidly shrank and there was widespread unrest in the remaining parts of the Empire. Many non-Turkish subjects no more considered themselves as subjects of the state. The Turkist policies of the Committee of Union and Progress, which came to power after the Revolution of 1908, so the arguments goes, only contributed to this

alienation. So, during the period in question, most of the non-Turkish subjects identified themselves with their future or present national state, and their relations with other Ottoman communities were minimized. In this atmosphere where the Empire was virtually dead, it is only normal to treat the ties between workers of one and another national group as international.

Both positions, I would argue, have certain valid points. What I will use in this paper is based on a combination of two, or rather, applying different perspectives to different parts of the Empire. The Ottoman lands were still vast at the end of the nineteenth century and each region was faced with different problems. Thus, it is appropriate to use different approaches for them. For example, Western and Central Anatolia was relatively more stable than other parts of the Empire, and inter-communal relations could still be maintained. On the other hand, the Armenian Question was increasingly destabilising Eastern Anatolia. The Arab lands had already been touched by nationalism but separatism was weak relative to Ottoman Balkans. The Ottoman Balkans, particularly the region known as Macedonia were the hotbed of nationalist ambitions and Great Power intervention. Because of the importance of Macedonia for the Ottoman working class, it is appropriate to deal with it in somewhat detail.

The ethno-religious composition of Macedonia was extremely complex. There were Bulgarians, Serbs, Turks, Greeks, Albanians, Vlachs, Jews, Gypsies and other small groups scattered all around the region. Although the economic and living conditions were not so much favourable in the Ottoman Balkans, the situation was not radically different from other parts of the empire and there was no unusual suffering on the part of Balkan peoples during most of the Ottoman rule. The real problems began starting from the early nineteenth century under the influence of the French revolution and the general movement of Western ideas. Among these ideas, nationalism proved to be the most influential and complex concerning Macedonia. In fact, it is almost impossible to schematise the numerous tendencies and factors that became a part of the development of nationalism in the Balkans at this time³. In any event, Bulgarians, Serbs and Greeks developed claims over the entire region. External factors also played a significant role. The autonomous or independent states of Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece tried everything to promote the claims of whom they see as their brothers and sisters. On the other hand, the Macedonian question was a part of the Eastern Question for the European powers and therefore, they closely watched and constantly intervened into it. Unfortunately, their interventions often complicated the problems. Since Macedonia was under Ottoman rule, needless to say, political and policy changes in the Empire strongly influenced the developments concerning the region. The problems created by this mixture of competing nationalisms, rural unrest, Great Power intervention, and inconsistent Ottoman policies were solved with the worst possible method; Macedonia was partitioned among Balkan states with two consecutive wars that erupted just before the World War II.

For Macedonia, therefore, I intend to use the second approach that I mentioned above. I will assume that the situation made the functioning of a multi-ethnic and multi-

³ Langer, W. L. (1931) (2nd ed. 1950) *European Alliances and Alignments 1871-1890*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p.65

religious society impossible, and thus analyse solidarity ties among workers of different ethnic origins as international ties. For the rest of the Empire, however, intra-communal relations will be out of my concern.

The Strikes of 1908

This paper shall involve a discussion of the strikes of 1908 in that these events constitute one of the turning points of Ottoman labour movement. Following the July Revolution, an atmosphere of liberty emerged on all Ottoman lands. Ottoman workers, for their part, did not fail to utilise that period of ‘honeymoon’ for their interests. During the second half of 1908, a wave of strikes shook the Empire. From 24th July to the end of that year, more than a hundred⁴ strikes were organised across the Empire, from Salonika to İstanbul, Aydın to Beirut, Zonguldak-Eregli to Monastır (Bitola). This density in worker activism has not been seen again in Turkish history down to the present⁵. It is therefore appropriate to search for any signs of international solidarity during these strikes. The government reaction to the strikes was not very favourable; at least in two regions troops were directly involved. In the Zonguldak-Eregli coal basin, for example, troops were sent to suppress the strike and there were arrests following the strikes.⁶ Thus, the period of strikes was a very difficult time for Ottoman workers, who at the time had no formal unions. Under these circumstances, support and solidarity from international labour movement would be invaluable. So, did the strikers of 1908 enjoy any such support? To our knowledge, this question can be answered only in the negative. In these more than hundred strikes, Ottoman workers were virtually alone. Given the circumstances, they did their best. Indeed, it is possible to say that most of the strikes were successful. This happened, on the other hand, without considerable support from and solidarity with their fellow workers in other countries. Just like their position during much of the period in question, they were isolated in that year of struggle, too.

An Exception: The Socialist Workers’ Federation of Salonika

The Socialist Workers’ Federation of Salonika stands as an exception within the Ottoman labour movement. The federation succeeded in building a strong, multi-ethnic organization that became a real ‘factor’ in regional and sometimes even Ottoman politics. Unlike most Ottoman workers’ associations, which organized basically on the basis of ethnicity and/or religion, it purported from the beginning to organize workers from all ethnic and religious groups. This endeavour was even more important in Macedonia, which, as I have noted above, was a hotbed of ethnic conflict. Moreover, it established closed ties with the Second International. The Federation, therefore, shall be

⁴ This figure is still tentative. More strikes could be ‘discovered’ via new research. For example, my own research on the Zonguldak-Eregli coal basin revealed certain 1910 strikes that were unknown in the literature. It is plausible to assume that more strikes took place during 1908 as well in different places. See E.A. Aytekin, “Workers of the Eregli-Zonguldak Coal Basin, 1848-1922”, unpublished master’s thesis, Bilkent University, Ankara, 2001

⁵ M.Şehmus Güzel, *Türkiye’de İşçi Hareketi 1908-1984* (İstanbul: Kaynak, 1996), pp.31-2.

⁶ Quataert, Donald, *Social Disintegration and Popular Resistance in the Ottoman Empire, 1881-1908. Reactions to European Economic Penetration* (New York: NYU Press, 1983), p.64

a major point in any discussion of the ties of international solidarity of the Ottoman working class.

The Federation was established in Salonika, and this was no coincidence. The city provided a suitable atmosphere for the emergence and strengthening of a socialist workers' association based on federative principles. Salonika was one of the most important cities of the Ottoman Empire. It was connected with railways to Istanbul, and to major European centres. By the turn of the century, as much as one seventh of the total foreign trade passed through its port.⁷ The industry was also quite developed. There were, among others, tobacco, beer, soap factories, and the total number of workers employed in various trades was around 20.000.⁸ This lively commercial and industrial life had brought about a flourishing press and education. Each ethnic group had its own schools. There were twenty newspapers published in different languages.⁹

The city had an enormously rich ethnic composition. There were Jews, Muslims, Greeks, converts¹⁰, Slavs and Europeans living in Salonika. Among the ethnic and religious groups, Sephardim Jews were undoubtedly the dominant one. "According to a census of 1910, they were 60.000 in a population of nearly 150.000.¹¹ But their role in commerce and industry on the one hand, and intellectual and cultural life on the other, was much greater than their proportion in the population. They controlled a great deal of the economic activity in the city, and also made up the two thirds of the working class.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, the working class lived and worked under harsh conditions. The workday was fourteen or fifteen hours and the purchasing power of money earned in these long workdays was constantly shrinking. The economy was highly inflationist and it was impossible for the real wages to catch up with the rising prices. The workers of Salonika, on the other hand, did not remain passive to this deterioration in their conditions. They formed union-like groups and went to strike in 1904, 1905 and 1906.¹²

Against this background of a complex ethno-religious structure, a thriving economy, tough living and working conditions for the labourers, and an overall conflict and constant tension in Macedonia, the Socialist Workers' Federation was formed in July 1909, with the merger of the Socialist Worker Association and two Bulgarian socialist groups.¹³ In its strongest moment, it was able to organize six thousand workers. Although it attracted workers from different ethnic origins, the distribution was not even. The majority of the workers organized into the Federation were Jewish. Greek workers, on the other hand, were the ethnic group among which the Federation was the least successful. The federation published daily newspapers. These were *Jornal del*

⁷ Paul Dumont, "Bir Osmanli Sosyalist Orgutu: Selanik Sosyalist Isci Federasyonu" in George Haupt and Paul Dumont, *Osmanli Imparatorlugu'nda Sosyalist Hareketler* (Istanbul: Gozlem, 1977), p.40

⁸ Ibid., p.41

⁹ Ibid., pp.42-3

¹⁰ The Jews who had converted to Islam.

¹¹ George Haupt, "Selanik Sosyalist Isci Federasyonu Tarihine Giris" in George Haupt and Paul Dumont, *Osmanli Imparatorlugu'nda Sosyalist Hareketler* (Istanbul: Gozlem, 1977), p., 17

¹² Paul Dumont, *Du Socialisme Ottoman A L'Internationalisme Anatolien* (Istanbul: Les Editions Isis, 1997), p.59

¹³ Haupt, "Giris", p.24

Laborador (in Judeo-Espagnol (Ladino), Bulgarian, Greek and Turkish, later Ladino and Bulgarian) followed by Solidaridad Ovradera (sometimes in only Ladino sometimes Ladino and Bulgarian) and finally Avanti (in Ladino and French).¹⁴

Before discussing the international ties of the Federation, it is appropriate to go into detail about its political tendencies and responses to various developments that took place in the unstable spatial and temporal context. The first question that has occupied historians concerns the nature of the socialism of the Federation. Velikof, an authoritative Bulgarian historian, has claimed that the Federation was a reformist organization that had very little connection to revolutionary goals.¹⁵ George Haupt and Paul Dumont, the first scholars to engage in a systematic study of the Federation, however, reject this argument. Dumont argues that rather than being reformist, the Federation departed from a concrete analysis of the Ottoman reality and arrived at the conclusion that the 'national element' should be taken into consideration when the conditions and forms of the socialist struggle is being determined.¹⁶ Their solution to this problem was the principle of federalism. This principle was the main point of objection of the 'narrow' Bulgarian socialists, who left the federation shortly after its establishment.

If one of the main tenets of the Federation was federalism, the other was support for the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire. The Federation was formed in the aftermath of the liberal revolution of 1908. And its leadership was very sympathetic to the political program of the revolutionaries, the Committee of Union and Progress, which was based on protecting the territorial integrity of the Empire through an ideology of Ottomanism and integrative measures. This support for the established Ottoman order can probably be traced to two factors. First, the Sephardim Jews were worried about a possible disintegration of the Empire in that it would endanger their lives and well being. Secondly, Salonika's prosperity stemmed largely from its economic ties to its rich hinterland, Ottoman Macedonia. A partitioning of the region would mean cutting the city off its hinterland, which was not a desirable prospect for the inhabitants of the city. The Federation, thus, being an organization based in Salonika and dominated by Jews, defended the idea of the continuation of the Ottoman Empire only naturally.

The political attitude of the Federation, however, did not go unchanged. The leadership responded to the developments of the time by adjusting the Federation's position on important matters. The meeting of the Balkan socialist parties held in Belgrade in 1910 accepted the goal of a socialist federation of Balkan republics.¹⁷ The Federation very gradually moved towards that direction. Indeed, the Federation remained loyal to the status quo up until the end of the First Balkan War. It started to defend the autonomy of Macedonia within a Balkan federation only in spring 1913,¹⁸ when the events had left no other choice. The Federation in fact took an internationalist

¹⁴ Ibid., p.15

¹⁵ Stefan Velikof, "Sur le mouvement ouvrier et socialiste en Turquie après la révolution Jeune Turquie de 1908", *Etudes Balkaniques*, 1964, pp.29-48

¹⁶ Dumont, "SSIF", p.49

¹⁷ Haupt, "Giris", p.28

¹⁸ Dumont, *Socialisme*, p.112

stance during the Balkan Wars and was not really ready to accept the annexation of the city by Greece after the war. Despite this, the concrete situation forced the Federation once more to accept the fait accompli, and it began to be interested in what was going on in Athens and establish ties with other socialist groups in Greece.¹⁹

As to the international ties of the Federation, its quite intense correspondence with the presidential committee of the Socialist International provides the prime source. Not only can the international relations but also the domestic activities and attitude on certain matters of the Federation be found in this correspondence.

The sources in question depict the Federation as having a certain level of international awareness. The leadership was closely following the worldwide events concerning socialists and the labour movement, and they reacted to them whenever possible. A good illustration of that is the reaction of the Federation against the execution of Spanish socialist Francisco Ferrer. According to the annual report that the Federation sent to the International, the members of the Federation held two rallies in protest of the execution.²⁰ The Federation was also in contact with Austrian and Serbian socialist parties on the one hand, and Ottoman (Armenian) socialist groups such as Hincak and Tasnaksutyun and socialist-Zionist Poale Sion on the other.²¹ The conferences organized by the Federation and delivered in 1910 by Romanian-Bulgarian socialist Kristian Rakovski, who had a good reputation in the Balkans, can also be considered as an attempt to increase the international(ist) awareness of the workers of Salonika.²²

The correspondence between the presidential committee of the International and the Federation indeed gives us a fuller picture of the international ties of solidarity of the latter. One major issue that the Federation brought into the attention of the International was its relationship with the new Young Turk regime in the Ottoman Empire. The Federation tried to handle the issue by itself, and whenever necessary it sought international help. In a letter of December 3rd, 1910, the Federation's representative to the International complained about the anti-socialist policies of the Young Turk regime and asked for help to publish articles in European newspapers about the situation they were faced with.²³ A month later, however, the representative had a very different perspective. He wrote to the presidential committee that it would be a mistake to attack the regime from abroad using the press and other means. He argued that they would continue to resist the oppressive policies of CUP within the Empire and seek international help only when strictly necessary. Before long, the Federation had to do exactly this.²⁴ In June 1911, after the pressure from the government had become intense and their secretary general had been deported, the Federation sought immediate

¹⁹ Ibid., p.113

²⁰ "The Annual Report of the Socialist Workers' Federation of Salonika" June 1909-June 1910. All documents published in George Haupt and Paul Dumont, *Osmanli Imparatorlugu'nda Sosyalist Hareketler* (Istanbul: Gozlem, 1977)

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p.301

²³ Ibid., p.101

²⁴ Ibid., pp.104-5

help. It asked the International to organize a press campaign that would reveal the oppression that the Ottoman socialists were subjected to.

The degree of the intensity of the cooperation between the Federation and the presidential committee is also illustrated in the flow of information between the parties. For example, when an Ottoman socialist living in Paris about whom the leadership of the Federation knew little contacted and wanted to work with them, they tried to get information about this Ottoman socialist from the International.²⁵ The relation was reversed when a group of socialists from Istanbul got in touch with the International's presidential committee. This time the committee, with a classified letter, sought information about these people from the Federation.²⁶ Finally, after the Balkan war ruined Salonika, the Federation asked for financial help from the International to be distributed to workers and their families.²⁷

To sum up, the Ottoman workers in general had negligible, if any, ties of solidarity with their fellow workers abroad. They were by and large alone in their struggle under difficult circumstances. Moreover, most of their organizations were based on ethnicity; this decreased the level of cooperation and contact even between different groups of Ottoman workers. The most noticeable exception to this situation was the Socialist Workers' Federation of Salonika. This association succeeded in bringing together workers from different groups in the ethnically hostile atmosphere of Macedonia and established frequent contact and close ties with the international workers' organization of the time.

Turkish Working Class and International Solidarity during “Globalisation”

1980-2002: A Balance Sheet

More than twenty years that passed since 1980 were very tough times for the Turkish working class. In January 1980, in the midst of an economic crisis, the Turkish government declared the principles of a structural adjustment program. This program was so radical that, in a contemporary politician's words, its application was impossible in a parliamentary regime. This politician, of course, was not the only one who saw this. Only nine months later, the army, with the pretext of ending ‘anarchy and terror’, took over the government with a coup d'état. The coup enjoyed immense support from the big bourgeoisie. After the coup, the structural adjustment program was put into effect immediately and intensely. The program represented a shift from import substitution industrialization to export oriented industrialization, and the latter involved shrinkage in the internal demand. This was to be achieved through cutting the real income of masses sharply over a relatively short period of time. The working class, obviously, was the main target of this campaign for lowering real wages. Workers could hardly object to these policies of the military government, which repressed any sign of dissent in harshest ways.

²⁵ October 5th, 1911, Ibid., pp.122-3

²⁶ September 23rd, 1913

²⁷ Ibid., p.179

The new constitution of 1982 imposed by the military government, moreover, institutionalised the undemocratic nature of the military regime and even after parliamentary system was formally established made it very difficult for masses to oppose government policies. The new civilian government continued to employ neo-liberal policies, and engaged into a vigorous campaign for privatisation. In most cases, privatisation meant unemployment and de-unionisation. During this period, the economy underwent frequent crises. These crises resulted in growing IMF intervention into the economy. The most important economic policies came to be formulated and imposed by this organisation. The last economic crisis, which was the worst one since WWII, came in 2001. It brought about an enormous shrinkage in Turkish economy, which in turn, resulted in massive unemployment.

During these years and in the midst of oppression, neo-liberal policies and intervention from international financial institutions, the working class was not completely passive. The first wave of worker militancy came in spring 1989. These actions were so effective that they secured a sharp increase in real wages. The worker activity in 1989 can be considered as the first 'payback' to neo-liberal policies of the period after 1980. Before long came the miners' march to Ankara. Against the government plans to shut down all coalmines in the region, the miners of Zonguldak, a mining city on the Black Sea coast, organized a mass march to Ankara, the country's capital. This march, which took place in the winter of 1990-91, is perhaps the most spectacular example of worker activism for the entire period of 1980-2002. It was the most important issue in the country's agenda for weeks, and even though the union leadership against most of the workers' wishes ended it, it prevented the government from shutting down the pits.

International Relations of Turkish Unions

Now we shall have a general look at the international ties of solidarity of Turkish workers during the last twenty-two years. First, there are still legal obstacles for workers' international relationships. Until 1995, it was difficult for Turkish unions to be members of international trade union organisations. This procedure is now easier but there are still important problems. For example, the establishment of an international trade union organisation with an initiative from a Turkish union depends upon a prior permission from the cabinet.²⁸ Secondly, the unions and the confederations can only receive financial help from institutions of which either themselves or the Turkish Republic are not members with the cabinet approval.²⁹ Finally, the union officials have to get permission from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Interior when they are travelling abroad to visit foreign unions or when they are inviting foreign union officials to Turkey.³⁰

Another related subject is the membership of Turkish unions and confederations to international organizations. There are three major union confederations in Turkey: TURK-IS (Confederation of Trade Unions of Turkey) is the largest workers'

²⁸ Yildirim Koc, *Uluslararası Sendikacılık Hareketi* (Ankara:YOL-IS, TEKGIDA-IS, TES-IS, ORMAN-IS, 2000), p.23

²⁹ Ibid., p.24

³⁰ Ibid.

organization in Turkey. It was formed following the model of AFL-CIO, and it is a member of ICFTU since 1960. The second largest confederation, DISK (Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions), is a leftwing confederation and is a member of ICFTU since 1992. The third one, HAK-IS, a rightwing/Islamic confederation and became a member of ICFTU in 1997. TURK-IS and DISK are also members of OECD-TUAC.

Indeed, there is little indication that the Turkish unions are eager to carry their international ties beyond membership in international union organizations. For example, Yildirim Koc, the director of training of one of the biggest unions in Turkey, and the advisor to the president of TURK-IS, has warned other unions against receiving financial help from confederations in other countries on the grounds that the source of those amounts are usually the governments of those countries.³¹

The European Union: A Way Out for Turkish Workers?

One of the most heated political debates in Turkey during the last ten years revolves around Turkey's prospective membership to the European Union. The debate has many facets and has been conducted on different levels. For the purposes of this paper, however, it is sufficient to concentrate on one aspect of it. To put it simplistically, the question is "will Turkish workers be better-off or worse-off with Turkey's accession to the EU?" This question is directly related to the problem investigated in this paper in that one of the arguments put forth for Turkey's membership is that membership will increase Turkish workers' ties of solidarity. This, in turn, will put them in a stronger position in the country and produce important economic and political gains for them.

Indeed, the unions in Turkey are sharply divided over Turkey's accession. Some of them strongly support it; some reject and some are yet to have a definite policy. Even member unions of the same confederation can have opposing viewpoints about the issue. For example, the president of Kristal-IS, a member of the TURK-IS confederation, is an outspoken supporter of Turkey's EU membership, while the president of TURK-IS signed a document with nationalistic overtones against the membership.

One of the points that are often ignored by those who answer the above-mentioned question in the affirmative is that the EU that Turkey would become a member of in the future will not be the same entity as the present EU. Turkey may well become the thirtieth member state. In such a large union, it would be very difficult to hold the present labour standards. Moreover, there is no guarantee that more workers from more countries will mean more contact, cooperation and solidarity. The opposite could easily prevail.

Secondly, those who defend Turkey's EU membership tend to forget that the present EU is constantly becoming less and less 'social'. Practices such as private retirement funds, workers' becoming shareholders in their companies, 'a la carte contract', flexible work and even 'flexible strike'³² tend to undermine workers' overall position in the union. These tendencies, which stem from a combination of the capitalist dynamics of the EU itself and the worldwide neo-liberal trend, may create even more

³¹ Yildirim Koc, "Gelismis Ulkelerin Sendikalarinin Uluslararası Dayanismasi", *Aydinlik*, 26.5.2002

³² Gaye Yilmaz, "Uluslararası Sendikal Hareketin Küreselleşmeye Cevabına Eleştirel Bir Yaklaşım", *Praksis* 7.

problems for Turkish workers in that labour regulations in Turkey are less strict and the country has no welfare state tradition.

Another problem concerns the ETUC and is more directly related to the question of international solidarity. ETUC's response to the anti-labour attacks of European capital and governments is by no means promising. Instead of organizing a European-wide struggle against the capital's offensive, the confederation has been engaged in establishing a "European social model" in which the labour and the capital are "social partners".³³ The confederation is also far from developing a sound response to the impact of globalisation on European labour.³⁴ This situation in which the ETUC has found and at the same time put itself is a major obstacle for the prospect of Turkey's EU membership becoming a way out for the Turkish working class. Turkey's accession to the union may increase the intensity of formal contacts between Turkish and European workers. But it seems unlikely that this will mean a real increase in concrete solidarity.

Conclusion

Around the year 1900, the Ottoman labour movement was in a seemingly desperate situation. It had no basic legal rights, no formal trade unions, no permanent leadership, and no political parties. On the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Turkish labour movement is once again faced with a difficult situation. To be sure, costly struggles were waged and significant achievements were secured in between. Yet, twenty-two years of neo-liberalism combined with the pressures of the globalisation project is constantly challenging the working class, most visibly in the form of lowering real wages, unemployment, privatisation, and de-unionisation. There are significant differences and commonalties between the labour movement now and then. But there is one thing apparently common. The level of international solidarity has been insufficient. Hundred years ago, the Ottoman workers, with one significant exception, were alone in meeting the challenges of the time. Now, international solidarity is virtually limited to unions' membership in international trade union organizations. Turkey's possible accession to the EU, in addition, is hardly a real opportunity for Turkish workers.

In this situation, one way out seems to be thinking the working class's struggle as a threefold one that takes place simultaneously in global, nation-state, and local scales. Turkish workers should refuse retreating to the local level, and defend resolutely its rights and achievements on the nation-state level. The global scale, which seems to be a lost cause for the moment, should always be within labour movement's horizons. International solidarity, which is now almost out of the agenda of the Turkish working class, should occupy a central place in that agenda. Having more and stronger ties of international solidarity seems to be the only prospect for the Turkish working class in its struggle to resist and reverse the globalisation project.

³³ Koc, "Uluslararası", pp.54-5

³⁴ Yilmaz, "Yaklaşım"