

TUC

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The worsening situation for workers in Turkey

Briefing on labour and human rights.

Section one

Introduction

Turkey has continually breached¹ its commitments to internationally agreed conventions on trade union rights, freedom of association and collective bargaining. There have also been numerous reports of the suppression of critical and opposition voices, as well as human rights abuses, particularly against union members, journalists, public officials, ethnic minorities, and refugees.

Following a failed coup in July 2016, a state of emergency was called, giving President Erdoğan power to rule by decree. Initially for three months, it was renewed 7 times before finally coming to an end in 2018. However, during this period 32 emergency decrees were introduced, making approximately 300 amendments to 150 laws, many of which remain in place today.² And in April 2017 a referendum was narrowly won to move from a parliamentary system to a Presidential one, consolidating Erdoğan's power.

As well as an increasingly precarious and autocratic situation within Turkey, the Erdoğan regime is increasingly pursuing aggressive military activity outside of Turkey's borders, for example with its interventions in Syria and Libya.³

The TUC has a history of supporting Turkish trade unions and it is increasingly a priority for our affiliates as recent motions in [2016](#), [2017](#) and [2018](#) demonstrate. The TUC and affiliates want to see an immediate end to infringements on democratic norms and human rights, an end to the mistreatment of the Kurdish community, the release of all political prisoners, and the release of Abdullah Öcalan as a step towards peace talks, and engagement in a peace process.

The economic situation and Covid-19

During the Covid-19 crisis, 13 million workers are estimated to have lost their jobs⁴ and the unemployment rate is currently around 13 per cent.⁵ According to a research survey from DISK, the confederation of progressive trade unions in Turkey, 36 percent of participants said their income has decreased with 47.7 per cent of women and 34.2 percent of men said they did not receive a full salary, overtime pay or social payments.⁶ Around 75 per cent of workers say they are facing financial difficulty with more than a quarter saying their debts

1 Hurriyet Daily News, 01/06/2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-among-top-5-violators-of-ilo-conventions-disk-99939>

2 TUC, The Rise of the Far Right – Building a Trade Union Response, Dec 2020, <https://www.tuc.org.uk/TheRiseoftheFarRight?page=4#Turkey>

³ Ibid

4DISK (Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions), Covid-19 impact on workers, 13/07/2020, <http://disk.org.tr/2020/07/covid-19s-impact-on-workers/>

5 Trading Economics, <https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/unemployment-rate>

6 DISK (Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions), Covid-19 impact on workers, 13/07/2020 <http://disk.org.tr/2020/07/covid-19s-impact-on-workers/>

had increased and nearly 20 per cent saying they were unable to meet credit card payments.⁷

Section two

The worsening situation for workers and opposition voices

The situation for workers, trade union members and opposition voices has worsened since the State of emergency was declared in 2016. The International Trades Union Confederation (ITUC) has named Turkey as one of the top 10 worst countries for workers, noting that trade unions have been operating 'in a climate of fear and under the constant threat of retaliation' since the 2016 coup attempt.⁸ And Human Rights Watch (HRW) points to 'deepening human rights crisis over the past four years with a dramatic erosion of [Turkey's] rule of law and democracy framework'.⁹

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government use draconian anti-terror laws to stifle criticism and opposition and this has led to the arrest of many union members, journalists and public sector workers and officials.

During the state of emergency 150,000 people were detained, including 78,000 people under these anti-terror laws. Among those arrested were at least 87 mayors, nine MPs from the People's Democratic Party (HDP), 300 journalists and 570 lawyers. Human rights organisations such as Amnesty International documented reports of widespread beatings, torture and other forms of ill-treatment.¹⁰

Unions

Nearly 152,000 public servants including teachers, police and military officials, doctors, judges and prosecutors, many of whom are also union members, were dismissed or suspended with little or no right to appeal during the state of emergency.¹¹ The Government set up an Inquiry Commission to investigate State of Emergency practices in January 2017. As of July 2020, over 18,000 dismissal cases were still to be investigated and of the 126,000 that were submitted to the Commission, only 12,100 so far have resulted in public officers being reinstated while 96,000 were upheld.¹²

7 Ibid

8 ITUC, Global Rights Index 2020, https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/ituc_globalrightsindex_2020_en.pdf

9 Kenneth Roth, 'Human Rights Watch World Report 2020 – Turkey', <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/turkey>.

10 TUC, The Rise of the Far Right – Building a Trade Union Response, Dec 2020, <https://www.tuc.org.uk/TheRiseoftheFarRight?page=4#Turkey>

11 Ibid

12 KESK Report to the International Labour Organisation, 31/08/2020, information shared by KESK at the request of TUC.

Turkey has four trade union centres affiliated to the ITUC and ETUC: Türk-iş, Hak-iş, Disk and Kesk.

Kesk are clear that their members, 4284 of whom have been dismissed, have been targeted as union members, stating *'These dismissals are based on superiors' impression on our colleagues; keeping an unlawful record of our members; monitoring lawful and legitimate social media postings that can never be considered an offence in any administrative system based on rule of law and democratic principles'*.

They have also raised concerns about members being punished during Covid-19 by being essentially exiled to other workplaces often in a completely different city, and many have also been subjected to administrative investigations and fines.¹³

Attacks on the media

During the state of emergency some 166 media outlets and 1,719 NGOs were closed by executive decree. Attacks on freedom of expression extended to the internet and social media, with over 100,000 websites blocked and Twitter receiving more than 7,000 censorship requests from the courts and state in 2017 alone.¹⁴

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) notes that Turkey is now 'the world's biggest jailer of professional journalists', who commonly spend more than one year in jail before trial and often receive long sentences.¹⁵

Women

Women face high levels of discrimination and inequality in Turkey.¹⁶ Since the state of emergency in 2016 the number of women arrested and imprisoned has increased with children forced to live in prison with their mothers. Over 21,000 women have been dismissed from the public sector by statutory decrees passed and almost 1500 women academics removed from their roles. Tens of thousands of women workers are facing judicial proceedings and punishments.

Turkey has high rates of femicide, and they have been increasing year on year, with 474 women murdered in 2019¹⁷, double the number in 2011 when Turkey signed the Istanbul Convention. The increasingly dangerous situation for women, lack of action by authorities

13 Ibid

14 TUC, The Rise of the Far Right – Building a Trade Union Response, Dec 2020,

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/TheRiseoftheFarRight?page=4#Turkey>

15 RSF World Press Freedom Index, Turkey. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/taxonomy/term/145>.

16 Solidarity with the People Of Turkey (SPOT), 'Turkey ranks 130th for sexual inequality in World Economic Forum's 2018 Global Gender Gap report', 21/12/2018, <http://spotturkey.co.uk/2018/12/21/turkey-ranks-130th-for-sexual-inequality-out-of-149-countries/>

17 McKernan, B. The Guardian, 'Murder in Turkey sparks outrage over rising violence against women', 23/07/2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/23/turkey-outrage-rising-violence-against-women>

and threat of withdrawing from the Convention resulted in protests throughout the summer of 2020.¹⁸

Ethnic minorities and refugees

Kurds and ethnic minorities are systematically discriminated against and this has been heightened with the policies of President Erdoğan's AKP government. In recent years, the regime has pursued a political strategy that combines right-wing nationalist rhetoric, anti-Kurdish aggression, and a confrontational foreign policy with measures to placate the AKP's traditional core base of religious conservatives.

Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan has been imprisoned since 1999 - The Freedom for Öcalan campaign is a UK trade union-backed initiative to secure his release as a way to create conditions for peace negotiations.¹⁹

Repression of Kurdish political representatives continue throughout the pandemic with reports of military incursions into Kurdish areas along the southern Turkish border. The government has also blocked or cut financing and borrowing for opposition-controlled municipalities in a bid to force them into implementing austerity measures.

Refugees, along with the Kurds, have been among the main victims of the AKP's radical nationalist turn and a concerted media effort to portray them as terrorists and criminals.²⁰ For example, the Yazidis who had escaped ISIS in Syria were not permitted entry into Turkey because of ethnic and religious attacks, and Turkish authorities are believed to have illegally deported large numbers of refugees last October.

The UK's trade with Turkey

The UK is currently negotiating a trade agreement with Turkey which aims to replicate the effect of the customs union arrangement Turkey and the UK have until the end of the transition period in December, which means there is tariff free trade on most goods traded between the countries.

The TUC believes the UK should not agree a trade agreement with Turkey until it respects fundamental workers' rights, as noted above. The UK should use its leverage in trade negotiations with Turkey to ensure that the Turkish government respects labour and human rights.

In line with the UK governments commitment to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights²¹ - which states that "business enterprises should respect human rights" and

18 Geybullayeva, A. 'In Turkey, women rise up to stop withdrawal from Istanbul Convention', 23/09/2020 <https://globalvoices.org/2020/09/23/in-turkey-women-rise-up-to-stop-withdrawal-from-the-istanbul-convention/>

19 Freedom for Ocalan website, <https://freedomforocalan.org/>

20 'Media in Turkey: 5 thousand 515 instances of hate speech in a year', Bianet (English), 18 September 2020. Available at: <https://bianet.org/english/media/231141-media-in-turkey-5-thousand-515-instances-of-hate-speech-in-a-year>.

21 Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 27/05/2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/implementing-the-un-guiding-principles-on-business-and-human-rights-may-2020-update>

this is expected wherever they operate²² - British companies should also carry out human rights due diligence throughout their supply chains in Turkey. And they should use their buying power to ensure that workers' rights are fully respected, including that workers can form or join trade unions.

Section three

Union solidarity and TUC policy

The TUC works with international colleagues at the ETUC (European Trade Union Confederation) and the ITUC, to campaign against labour rights abuse in Turkey and the attacks on democracy, freedom of speech, and national self-determination. We use institutions like the ILO to press for an end to these vicious attacks.

The TUC continues to work closely with trade unions in Turkey, by bringing them together with British trade unions in Britain and around the world.

TUC policy towards Turkey calls for:

- an immediate end to the unjustified repression and infringements of the most basic democratic norms and fundamental human rights, including the need to guarantee workers' rights and stop the repression of trade unions in Turkey;
- an end to the mistreatment of members of the Kurdish community;
- the immediate release of Abdullah Öcalan and other political prisoners being held in Turkey;
- and engagement in a peace process.

The TUC also calls for an ethical trade policy and for the UK to use its leverage in trade negotiations with Turkey to respect labour and human rights. The Turkish government must show respect for core International Labour Organisation conventions as a pre-condition for any agreement. Any UK-Turkey trade deal must include:

- Commitments to ratify international labour conventions and the Sustainable Development goals, with penalties for violations and a role for unions in enforcement.
- Protections for the rights of migrant workers.
- Protections for the rights of government to use public procurement and state-owned enterprises to deliver economic, social, and environmental goals.
- Protection of all public services by excluding them from any deal - universal, quality public services must be run for public benefit – not private profit.

²² UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights,
https://www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf

- Protections for the rights of governments to protect consumer and data rights for consumers and workers in relation to privacy, transparency, data misuse, cross border regulation of data flows and data being used for discrimination.
- Exclusions for all kinds of special courts for foreign investors.
- Exclusions for extensions of patent protection or data exclusivity periods for pharmaceutical drugs.
- Commitments to support and implement the Paris Agreement and policies to support a Just Transition.
- Expansion of cooperation to combat unfair trade practices.

A deal must not be agreed without these guarantees.

British companies should also carry out human rights due diligence throughout their supply chains in Turkey and use their buying power to ensure that workers' rights are fully respected.