

**Briefing**



# Turkey: trade unions, crisis, repression.

August 2023

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## Introduction

Turkey is experiencing an ongoing economic, political, and social crisis. Following a failed coup attempt in 2016, the government declared a state of emergency under which they took a series of repressive measures. This period also saw an escalation of the conflict between the Turkish government and Kurdish separatists. This has been followed by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent unemployment crisis, a hyper inflationary crisis and currency collapse<sup>1</sup> and, most recently, a devastating earthquake.

All these events have been catastrophic for workers; Turkey has been listed in the ITUC's Global Rights Index ten worst countries for workers every year since 2016.<sup>2</sup>

In February 2023, the huge earthquake that struck large parts of southern and eastern Turkey, also effecting parts of Syria resulted in over 47,000 deaths as well as causing billions in damage. The crisis exacerbated failures to comply with basic safety regulation, facilitated by high level corruption between developers and government.<sup>3</sup> Trade union protests against corruption were met with repression.<sup>4</sup>

The scale of the crisis led some to believe that the May 2023 elections would result in a change of government. However, the incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdoan retained power in the second round of a closely fought election. Although the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost seats in parliament, they have been able to maintain a functioning majority with the support of the ultra-nationalist MHP.<sup>5</sup>

For about a decade, the increasingly far right<sup>6</sup> Erdoan government has centralised power on the presidency while repressing democratic opposition (including trade unions), leading to calls from opposition parties for a return to parliamentary government.<sup>7</sup> The Kurdish conflict has enabled the government to engage in widespread repression of the Kurdish population throughout Turkey, with the government employing terrorism charges as a further method of repressing internal opposition.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Turkey Hit with Soaring Prices as Inflation Hits 80%. Guardian \(2022\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> [Global Rights Index 2022. International Trade Union Confederation \(2022\)](#).

<sup>3</sup> [How Corruption and Misrule Made Turkey's Earthquake Deadlier. Foreign Policy \(2023\)](#).

<sup>4</sup> [Detention of union leaders sets back relief efforts. ETUC \(2023\)](#).

<sup>5</sup> [Turkey elections 2023. The Guardian \(2023\)](#).

<sup>6</sup> [The Rise of the Far Right – building a trade union response. Trades Union Congress \(2020\)](#).

<sup>7</sup> [Turkish opposition parties promise a return to parliamentary system. Aljazeera \(2022\)](#).

<sup>8</sup> [UNISON is Standing with our Friends in Turkey. UNISON \(2022\)](#).

The AKP's religious conservatism has had particularly negative impacts on women and religious minorities, such as the Alevi Muslims. Turkey has seen escalating rates of femicide<sup>9</sup> and has withdrawn from the Istanbul Convention on preventing violence against women.<sup>10</sup>

At a time when workers need trade unions more than ever, a combination of restrictive anti-union laws, legal persecution by government, and egregious union busting by employers has restricted the capacity of workers in Turkey to defend their position either politically or in the workplace.

Support for trade unionists in Turkey, especially those facing acute repression, is therefore an international solidarity priority for the Trades Union Congress (TUC).

## **The economic crisis**

Turkey's economic model since 2018 has tended towards inflationary, with interest rates held deliberately low favour of faster growth. This means that the economy has been running "hot" for several years which, combined with the additional inflationary effects of the pandemic and war in Ukraine, triggered a hyperinflationary crisis and currency collapse in 2022.<sup>11</sup>

During the Covid-19 crisis, 13 million workers were estimated to have lost their jobs and the unemployment rate peaked at around 13 per cent. According to a research survey from DİSK, 36 per cent of participants said their income has decreased, with 47.7 per cent of women and 34.2 per cent of men saying they did not receive a full salary, overtime pay, or social payments.<sup>12</sup>

The combined impact of current crisis and the pandemic on workers' real wages and living standards has been predictably catastrophic, which may account for a recent wave of official and unofficial labour militancy, as well the repressive backlash to it.<sup>13</sup>

## **The trade union landscape**

Workers fall under two separate legal regimes in Turkey, white collar 'public employees' (civil servants, broadly defined to include workers like teachers) and 'workers' (including all private sector employees and public sector workers in manual or industrial jobs).

Unionisation among both categories of government workers is high at around 65%, however civil servants do not have the right to strike, and the majority are members of Memur-Sen, a union of questionable independence (the ITUC has twice refused applications for membership).<sup>14</sup>

Unionisation drops sharply to only seven per cent in the private sector, where the majority of people are employed (13.5 million compared to around five million in the public sector). It is almost non-existent in the large informal sector (employing approximately 2.5 million people), where union membership is technically illegal.<sup>15</sup>

Further, low union density in key sectors is exacerbated by inter-union competition between unions affiliated to different federations with sharply differentiated ideological perspectives. Turkey's 2.1 million unionised workers in the industrial sector are dispersed among 215 different unions, partly

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<sup>9</sup> [Murder in Turkey sparks outrage over rising violence against women. The Guardian \(2020\)](#).

<sup>10</sup> [Why Turkey's Withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention is a Global Problem. Open Democracy \(2021\)](#).

<sup>11</sup> [Turkey Hit with Soaring Prices. Guardian \(2022\)](#).

<sup>12</sup> [The Worsening Situation for Workers in Turkey. Trades Union Congress \(2020\)](#).

<sup>13</sup> [Is Labor Making a Comeback? The 2022 Strike Wave in Turkey. Cambridge \(2022\)](#).

<sup>14</sup> [Ministry in Turkey designates pro-government Memur-Sen as representative at ILO conference. BirGün \(2017\)](#).

<sup>15</sup> [Trade Unions in Turkey. İstanbul: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung \(2022\). \(See table 1\)](#)

because of laws which forbid the formation of general or even professional unions which can organise across different sectors.<sup>16</sup>

Turkey has four trade union centres affiliated to the ITUC (International Trade Union Confederation) and ETUC (European Trade Union Confederation), each with different sectoral and political orientations.

- **TÜRK-İŞ**

Established in 1952, TÜRK-İŞ is the largest and oldest federation in Turkey and is the only one to have remained legal throughout every period of military government.

- **HAK-İŞ**

Established in 1976, the HAK-İŞ trade union centre was originally aligned with the Islamist MSP party.

- **DİSK**

DİSK emerged as a radical split from TÜRK-İŞ in 1967, but was suppressed following a military coup in 1980, only able to resume its activities in 1991.

- **KESK**

KESK is a federation representing public sector employees in Turkey and was established in 1995, the year public employees gained the legal right to form unions.

## **Other federations**

There are two non-ITUC/ETUC affiliated federations, both organising civil servants: Memur-Sen (broadly aligned with HAK-İŞ), and Kamu-Sen which has close links to the far right MHP party.<sup>17</sup>

## **Anti-union measures**

### **Anti-union laws**

Following a military coup in 1980, Turkey experienced one of the sharpest drops in trade union collective bargaining coverage in the OECD, dropping from 25 per cent and reaching a low of six per cent in 2013. The total has since risen to nine per cent, almost exclusively because of a successful union-led drive to insource 750,000 subcontracted public sector workers in 2018.<sup>18</sup>

The main obstacle to rebuilding trade union strength, especially in the private sector, are the high membership thresholds and slow authorisation process for union recognition - necessary before either collective bargaining or strike action can take place.

However, to achieve recognition unions must have 50 per cent membership of an enterprise in addition to having at least one per cent density in the entire sector, with the boundaries of the sector defined by law. Unions organising in one sector are restricted from organising in another.<sup>19</sup>

Once a union has achieved the required membership thresholds, employers are able to delay recognition by invoking legal authorisation processes that usually last several years. Research has

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid (See table 4)

<sup>17</sup> Trade Unions in Turkey (2022).

<sup>18</sup> ibid

<sup>19</sup> ibid

shown that in 73 per cent of cases, employers are able to bust the union on the shop floor by the time the authorisation process has been completed by victimising or dismissing members and representatives. In other words, 73 per cent of successful applications for union recognition result in no recognition at all.<sup>20</sup>

### **Dismissals, trials, imprisonments**

Following the 2016 state of emergency, more than 150,000 public servants (including teachers; police and military officials; doctors; and judges and prosecutors) many of whom were also union members, were dismissed or suspended with little or no right to appeal.

In 2017, the Government set up an Inquiry Commission to investigate State of Emergency practices. 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.<sup>21</sup>

Despite being by-far the smaller federation in the sector, a disproportionate 4284 of dismissed civil servants were members of KESK. They have been targeted as union members, with KESK 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 principle.'*<sup>22</sup>

In addition to dismissals, many leading KESK members are held up in continuous court hearings on spurious terrorism charges, based on poorly-evidence or un-evidenced accusations of links to the Kurdish separatist PKK.<sup>23</sup> Some high profile KESK leaders, for example Gönül Erden - former president of KESK healthcare affiliate SES – remained imprisoned for over a year without sentencing before being released into house arrest with no verdict returned.<sup>24</sup>

The risk of legal persecution extends to workers in other sectors, for example in 2017, 14 members TÜMTIS transport union (a TÜRK-İŞ affiliate) were given sentences between 1.5 and 6.5 years for 'for recruiting new members and obstructing the freedom of conducting business.' A verdict which clearly threatens the right to trade union organisation as such.<sup>25</sup>

### **Strike bans**

The current legislative framework for strike action in Turkey is set by the 2012 Law No.6356 on Trade Unions and Collective Labour Agreements. Strikes are only legal in the case of failures to reach agreement within a government-authorised collective bargaining agreement. Strikes to enforce union recognition are illegal. This, combined with the deliberately lengthy legal process in place before authorisation for collective bargaining can be secured, is a great advantage to union busting employers and a significant restriction on the right to strike.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> ibid

<sup>21</sup> [The Worsening Situation for Workers in Turkey. Trades Union Congress \(2020\)](#).

<sup>22</sup> ibid

<sup>23</sup> [UNISON Attends the Trial of Trade Unionists in Turkey \(2022\)](#)

Trade Union Freedom on Trial in Turkey (2022)

In Turkey trade unionists face politically motivated injustice (2023).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid (2023)

<sup>25</sup> [Global Rights Index 2018. International Trade Union Confederation \(2018\)](#).

<sup>26</sup> Trade Union Freedom on Trial in Turkey (2022).

Moreover, the 2012 law gives the government power to ban any strike on grounds of either national security or public health, with no clear limits to what can be defined in terms of 'national security'. Recent reports from DİSK have highlighted strikes in the metal working sector - in foreign owned, non-defence industry private sector manufactories - were banned on 'national security' grounds at the behest of employers, demonstrating explicit collusion between employers and government to undertake union busting.

Since 2015, the government has banned 227 lawful strikes of some 170,000 workers. Meanwhile protesting and public demonstrations have become riskier. Research has shown that police forces intervened in nine per cent of working-class protests in 2015, while the ratio increased to 16 per cent in 2016 and 21 per cent in 2017.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, police intervened brutally in an unofficial strike at an automotive parts plant in January 2022, taking nearly 200 workers into custody.<sup>28</sup>

## Conflict and political repression

### Conflict with Kurdish separatists

Kurds and other minorities are systematically discriminated against in Turkey. 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.<sup>29</sup>

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.<sup>30</sup>

The Turkish-Kurdish conflict, which began in 1984, has historically centred on Southern Turkey. In 2013, a ceasefire was established between Turkey and the Kurdish separatist PKK. However, the ceasefire collapsed in July 2015 and the conflict restarted with renewed intensity and violence. Turkish forces have now pushed towards PKK strongholds in northern Iraq and northeastern Syria.<sup>31</sup>

Throughout 2022, successive Turkish military operations have undertaken the repeated bombing of civilian targets, attracting widespread international condemnation, including in a cross party EDM (Early Day Motion) in the UK parliament.<sup>32</sup>

### Repression of political opposition

During the state of emergency 150,000 people were detained, including 78,000 people detained under 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

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<sup>27</sup> Is Labour Making a Comeback? (2022).

<sup>28</sup> [200 Turkish Workers Detained After Protesting Dismissal of Colleagues Over Unionization Efforts. Duvar English \(2022\)](#).

<sup>29</sup> The Worsening Situation for Workers in Turkey (2022).

<sup>30</sup> [Freedom for Öcalan campaign on Twitter](#).

<sup>31</sup> [Turkey Launches New Offensive Against Kurdish Rebels in Iraq. Aljazeera \(2022\)](#).

<sup>32</sup> [EDM \(Early Day Motion\)1171: Turkish military action in Northern Iraq \(2022\)](#).

Amnesty International documented reports of widespread beatings, torture, and other forms of ill-treatment.<sup>33</sup>

The invasion of Northern Iraq and Syria has been accompanied by further repression of opposition forces. Erdoğan calls the opposition HDP the “political extension” of the PKK. The HDP rejects that association, saying it wants a negotiated settlement to the conflict. Nonetheless, 108 opposition politicians were brought to trial on terrorism charges in 2022, a move widely understood to be an attempt at impacting the upcoming presidential election.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, Istanbul’s high profile opposition CHP Mayor – and potential Erdoğan rival – was imprisoned for over two years and banned from politics for referring to Turkey’s supreme electoral council as “fools.”<sup>35</sup>

### 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.<sup>36</sup>

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, and that ‘all possible means are used to undermine critics.’<sup>37</sup>

### Women’s rights

Women face high levels of discrimination and inequality in Turkey.<sup>38</sup> 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 2019,<sup>39</sup> double the number in 2011 when Turkey signed the Istanbul Convention. The increasingly dangerous situation for women, lack of action by authorities and threat of withdrawing from the Convention resulted in protests throughout the summer of 2020.<sup>40</sup>

### Recommendations for the British government

- Oppose the Turkish government’s war on the Kurdish population in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, and help restart the abandoned peace process with the PKK.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> [Aftermath of the failed Turkey coup: Torture, beatings and rape. Amnesty International \(2018\).](#)

<sup>34</sup> [Erdoğan Targets Turkey’s Kurdish ‘Kingmakers’. Financial Times \(2022\)](#)

<sup>35</sup> [Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu sentenced to jail over ‘fools’ insult. Guardian \(2022\).](#)

<sup>36</sup> [The Rise of the Far Right \(2020\).](#)

<sup>37</sup> [Reporters Without Borders](#)

<sup>38</sup> [Turkey ranks 130th for sexual inequality in World Economic Forum’s 2018 Global Gender Gap report. SPOT \(2018\)](#)

<sup>39</sup> [Murder in Turkey sparks outrage over rising violence against women’. The Guardian \(2020\).](#)

<sup>40</sup> [In Turkey, women rise up to stop withdrawal from Istanbul Convention. Global Voices \(2020\).](#)

<sup>41</sup> <https://congress.tuc.org.uk/composite-14-turkey/#sthash.VXIJLlwh.84yJ3oOm.dpbs>

- Support the release imprisoned Kurdish political leader Abdullah Öcalan so that he can play a full role in the peace process.<sup>42</sup>
- Oppose the persecution of trade unionists and support the reinstatement of trade unionists suspended or dismissed in the wake of the failed 2016 coup.
- Instruct the British embassy to send trial observers to all hearings against trade unionists.
- Not to engage in negotiations for a free trade agreement while abuses of human rights, labour rights, and restrictions on trade union freedom are taking place, and for any future trade agreement with Turkey to have enforceable labour protections.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> ibid

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/uk-and-turkey-unions-suspend-uk-turkey-deal-until-workers-rights-are-respected>