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Brian Mello



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(Re)Considering the Labor Movement in Turkey

Brian Mello

- 1 Around mid-afternoon on 1 May 2004 I left the safe confines of Ankara's wealthy Çankaya neighborhood, where the Turkish President's residence is located, and headed for the May Day rally being held across the city at Sıhhiye Square. In Kızılay I saw the first of many police barricades – armored vehicles lined up in rows along Atatürk Boulevard and dozens of police officers standing in formidable ranks at the edge of Güven Park. Just before reaching the square, I could see and hear the rally beginning in the distance. By the time I walked the remaining few blocks, though, the police had already shut off the area, prohibiting entrance. The number of police officers was staggering – and the shiny body armor, helmets, and shields laid out in rows to be donned in a moment's notice were quite impressive as well. I told one police officer that I was from the United States, researching the labor movement in Turkey, and that I wanted to take a few pictures at the rally. He kindly informed me that I would have to make my way to the other side of the square, which I did. There, after another conversation with the police, a search of my bag, and some shock that an American would want to go to a demonstration – the general theme of which was against American imperialism – I was informed that I could enter the rally.
- 2 The rally itself was quite festive – more people seemed swayed by the drumming and dancing taking place in the back than by the speeches of the labor leaders in the front. Nonetheless, a parade of speakers from Turkey's major union confederations sequentially raised the standard concerns of labor unions in Turkey and around the world: from the government's lack of concern for the unemployed, to the need to end the U.S. occupation in Iraq, to the, by now standard, opposition to the privatization of state owned enterprises. In the end, although I knew that this event (and others like it) were largely symbolic and not the kind of organizing that directly brings about changes, I couldn't help but reflect on the potential threat posed by organized labor in Turkey. Indeed, May Day celebrations have a long and contentious history in Turkey, and their display of class politics serve to remind one of the untenable belief that

Turkey is (or ought to be) a classless society that informed the Kemalist concept of populism [*halkçılık*].

- 3 Although it has not dominated Turkish studies, the history and importance of the labor movement in Turkey has been increasingly examined by historians and social scientists alike.¹ Moreover, as recent May Day demonstrations highlight, state-labor relations remain an important and tense part of Turkish politics. Perhaps because of the importance of Kurdish and Islamist politics, and the global decline in communist, socialist, and leftist ideologies, the labor movement in Turkey appears to be less important today than it was during the contentious decades of the 1960s and 1970s. Nonetheless, those who study the labor movement in Turkey acknowledge that the labor movement became increasingly active and confrontational in the late 1980s and 1990s. From the massive strike by coalminers in Zonguldak to the larger rallies on May Day, labor activists have taken to the street to demand democratic rights and to oppose neo-liberal economic reforms.

Studying the Turkish Labor Movement

- 4 The predominant view of the labor movement in Turkey is one that sees the movement as relatively inconsequential to the development of Turkish state-society relations. This conclusion is based on three lines of reasoning: first, the notion that the state granted labor rights and freedoms without a protracted struggle from below, second, the notion that the military coup of 1980 effectively crushed the Turkish labor movement, and finally, the belief that the Turkish labor movement became hampered by internal divisions resulting from abstract theoretical debates. For example, Mehmet Beşeli concludes that the granting of political rights prior to political struggle is the most important reason for “The limited role of the union movement in democratic developments” (2002: 236-237). After highlighting the repression of labor activism in the 1980s, Günseli Berik and Cihan Bilginsoy argue, “the labor movement in Turkey did not play an active role in the political and economic transformation of the country” (1996: 37). Alpaslan Işıklı declares, “it is not possible to speak of a unionization movement with any determining influence during the principal turning points of the democratic history of Turkey” (1987: 309). Metin Heper concludes, “It is in Turkey . . . that interest groups have been virtually ignored” (1991: 21). Ahmet Samim sees the factional conflict between socialists, communists, and social democrats that emerged in Turkish labor activism during the 1970s as a waste of resources that contributed to the failure to generate enough popular support to resist repression. “Instead of demonstrating that there were rational and reachable alternatives to the urgent – and obviously social problems of every day life,” he laments, “Turkish socialists offered voluminous debates on whether or not the ‘Theory of Three Worlds’ was opportunist” (1987: 170).
- 5 Indeed, the labor movement in Turkey has never received as much attention as other oppositional social movements – those involving Kurds, women’s organizations, and Islamist politics. Yet, as with these other movements the history of Turkish labor activism has a great deal to tell us about the development of the Kemalist project of modernity. In short, much of modern Turkish politics can be understood with reference to the Kemalist effort to forge a new Turkish nation out of the Ottoman Empire and the various social reactions this has inspired from individuals and groups excluded from

this effort. Thus, as Kurdish and Islamist political mobilization stands in critique of the Kemalist tenets of nationalism and secularism, working class mobilization challenges the central assumptions of the Kemalist tenet of populism.

- 6 Atatürk's conception of populism sought to gain support for the effort to create a new sense of nationalism, and as such called for identification with the nation above all other forms of group identity. Yet, unlike varieties of populism elsewhere, the Turkish version of populism never actually sought to create the types of institutions that might actually mobilize the people in support of the state. Rather, the defining feature of Kemalist populism was "the denial of the existence of classes in Turkey and the advocacy of absolute national solidarity in which each section of society had a specific role to play" (Zürcher 2005: 23). This notion of classes as artificial divisions foreign to Turkey had its roots in late Ottoman thought. Toward this end, the preeminent ideologist of Turkism, Ziya Gökalp specifically sought to articulate a basis for national identification that would avoid class antagonism. For Gökalp:

Strengthening national solidarity requires the raising not only of patriotic and civic morals but also of professional morals. As a result of social division of labor, every nation is divided into a number of professional and specialized groups... Each group is necessary and indispensable to the other. Is there not a sort of solidarity in the services they perform for each other and in their mutual need? (1968: 65)

- 7 Thus, as Zürcher summarizes, "In their denial of class struggle, their calling for national solidarity and their ruthless suppression of class-based organizations, there is a direct continuity between the Unionists and the Kemalists" (2005: 23).
- 8 Subsequently, according to Robert Bianchi, populism "became the main Kemalist principle underlying social policy and associational life during the one-party era" (1984: 100). In a speech made before the Izmir Economic Congress of 1923, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk provided an overview of the Kemalist conception of populism: "In my opinion, our nation does not possess various social classes that will pursue interests that are very different from one another and that will, accordingly, come into a state of struggle with each other. The existing classes are necessary and indispensable to one another" (quoted in Bianchi 1984: 101). Ahmad points out that, insofar as the early Republican political elite accepted the notion that classes did not exist in Turkey, "they saw themselves as leaders of the people [*halk*]." Moreover, the word:

"People" implied the coalescing of the various social forces against the old order. The principle task of this collective was not merely to destroy the old society but to contribute in the creation of a new one. Both tasks required total cohesion and unity among all the groups who made up the "people" and there was no room for a conflict of interest among them (1993: 79).

- 9 The political corollary of populism was the series of dictums and decrees designed to prevent any coordinated political action based on sub-national or class-based interests.
- 10 Yet, while an overview of the history of organized labor in Turkey during the one-party era illustrates the endurance of the state's commitment to populism, even the nascent presence of working class political mobilization cannot but lead one to conclude that in reality the Kemalist vision of a classless, solidaristic society was, at best, a utopian dream. Indeed, as articles in this volume point out, evidence of working class organization and class-based collective action periodically burst into the public sphere during the Ottoman Empire.² Thus, as Turkish labor activist and scholar Kemal Sülker points out, "we have used the right to strike since as early as 1872. However this right has been limited in various historical periods" (1968: 77).³

- 11 In other words, despite hostile organizing conditions, the labor movement in Turkey has nonetheless served as a working class challenge to Kemalism. The strength of this challenge has varied over time; it has been subject to state repression, as well as internal division and dissent; and it has been affected by broader transformations in the international system. Yet, this challenge to the denial of class difference has been an important feature of Turkish politics, one that connects the labor movement with central themes of Kurdish, Islamist and feminist politics – although these connections are too often understudied and unacknowledged. Thus, as Jenny White concludes, “The denial of class difference in the face of great disparities in distribution of the benefits of economic development and a widening chasm between rich and poor has been an important spur to the development of social movements in Turkey and, since the 1980s, to Islamist populism” (2008: 358).

Considering the Turkish Labor Movement

- 12 This special issue of *The European Journal of Turkish Studies* contributes to the evaluation of the history and importance of labor movement activism in Turkey. A primary goal of the articles in this issue is to extend social science explanations to the labor movement in Turkey. Thus, the articles in this issue are tied together by the effort to draw from a variety of theoretical concepts, discourses, and frameworks within the social sciences in order to (re)consider the politics of labor movement activism in Turkey. These articles are also tied together by their focus on the political dimensions of labor movement activism in Turkey. Indeed, this focus on the political, as opposed to the merely economic, role of labor movements reflects central themes within the comparative analysis of labor movements.⁴ Some of the articles in this issue focus on political forces that have shaped the development of Turkish labor activism – in both ways that opened up political opportunities, and in ways that constrained them. Some of the articles examine the impact of transnational factors – in particular neoliberal economic transformations and the process of European integration – on the labor movement in Turkey. Other articles explore particular moments in Turkish labor history, offering explanations for the ways in which the Turkish labor movement has emerged and changed over time.
- 13 In addition to broad commonalities, three areas of focus emerge within this collection of articles: The first area involves the impact of globalization, European integration, and neoliberal economics on the labor movement in Turkey. Yet, while the articles related to this theme share a focus on how broader international political and economic transformations have affected the Turkish labor movement, they also demonstrate that these processes have been both potentially beneficial to workers in Turkey, and potentially threatening to Turkish labor activism. Kaan Agartan’s essay focuses on the potential benefits the process of European integration can provide for the Turkish labor movement. Agartan’s central argument is that “the EU opens up a new space for the European labor movement to extend its organization and mobilization beyond national boundaries.” Agartan, therefore, focuses on two means through which the EU can provide benefits to the Turkish labor movement: first, through transnational networks such as those that represent workers at multinational corporations with factories in multiple EU countries (and especially the transnational connections embodied by the European Trade Union Confederation, which allows for

the coordination of bargaining in industries across Europe), and second, through enhanced labor rights resulting from changes to Turkish labor laws demanded by the EU entrance criteria.

- 14 Mustafa Doğan's article, on the other hand, focuses on the ways in which neo-liberal economic transformations presented threats to the Turkish labor movement. Drawing from E.P. Thompson's conceptualization of the moral economy, Doğan argues that the transformations away from statist economic policies that began with the IMF stabilization package in 1979 and continued throughout the 1980s undermined the moral economy that had guided Turkish working class development. In essence, Doğan argues that the privatization of state-economic enterprises under the Özal administration undermined the basic political and economic expectations enjoyed by workers in state-economic enterprises in the 1960s and 1970s. Consequently, for Doğan the resurgence of labor activism in the late 1980s, including the so-called spring actions of 1989 and the coal miners' strike in Zonguldak, are best understood as efforts of the Turkish labor movement to restore the old industrial order. Moreover, Doğan argues that insofar as this resurgence of labor activism was restorative, not radical, the longer term impact of the wave of labor protests in the late 1980s was limited as it became clear that restoration of the old economic system was impossible.
- 15 Finally, Işık Özel and Basak Kus offer a comparative analysis of the impact of neoliberal economic reforms on the labor movements in Mexico and Turkey. Here, Özel and Kus examine how historical differences in the institutionalization of labor organizations in these two states have contributed to differences in the ability of labor unions to resist neoliberal reforms, as well as to more recent transformations in institutional patterns. The long-standing incorporation of a centralized labor movement into the Mexican state, particularly during the decades of PRI domination, presented an impediment to more recent governments' efforts to impose liberalizing reforms. Consequently, neoliberal reforms in Mexico have both eroded some of the traditional political power of labor unions and contributed to new divisions and competition within the Mexican labor movement. In Turkey, on the other hand, the historical divisions in the labor movement meant that, while labor was an obstacle to neoliberal reforms, it could be dealt with fairly easily. Yet, as Özel and Kus note, the process of economic liberalization in Turkey has, unlike Mexico, contributed to greater centralization in the Turkish labor movement. Their article, therefore, provides a focus on how states shape labor movements.
- 16 A second group of articles focuses on the way internal political forces shaped the development of the Turkish labor movement. Betül Urhan and Seydi Çelik's article examines the impact of national security perceptions on the historical development of the Turkish labor movement. Labor activism in Turkey, they point out, has often been curbed or inhibited by the state because it is framed as a threat to national security. These inhibitions, Urhan and Çelik's analysis emphasizes, have placed a fetter on the ability of the Turkish labor movement to be a force for expanding democratic rights and freedoms. Thus, insofar as the labor movement in Turkey has been less successful at shaping the political arena than other labor movements, this is partially explained by the state's role in curbing political opportunities under the cover of national security. This history may be uniquely Turkish, but this phenomenon isn't necessarily so. In fact, it is quite common, internationally, that states cite national security concerns as justification for curbing union rights. The long history of this in Turkey,

and its clear impact constraining the development of Turkish labor activism, makes the Turkish case an ideal one in which to study the implications of perceptions of national security on labor movements.

- 17 My essay examines ideological differences within the Turkish labor movement that contributed to the important divisions during the 1960s and 1970s. Here, I offer an explanation for a seemingly simple, yet puzzling, schism within the Turkish labor movement. The explanatory framework I present blends Weberian sociology with more recent rational choice arguments focusing on analytic narratives, as well as insights drawn from the work of E.P. Thompson, Douglass North, and March and Olsen. By drawing from these approaches, I seek to explain the split within the Turkish labor movement in the 1960s by focusing on how alternative ideologies emerged within the Turkish labor movement, in conjunction with alternative institutions. Thus, what materialized in Turkey was an ideologically and institutionally fragmented labor movement, where different institutions maintained (at times) distinct goals for the political and economic development of Turkey, distinct conceptions of the role labor unions should play politically, and as a result, different levels of collective political action. My article, then, picks up on issues and themes raised by Özel and Kus, and Doğan, elsewhere in this issue.
- 18 Finally, a third set of articles focus on two strikes in Turkish labor history, and considers the broader implications of these instances of labor movement activism. Engin Berber's analysis of striking Izmir port workers during the late Ottoman period provides an analysis of early Turkish labor activism. Here, the primary motivation for striking workers was unfair wage remuneration, rather than an overtly political agenda. Yet, Berber's is a story about the emergent nature of the Turkish working class. For Berber, that Izmir port workers organized at all reflects the ways in which the organization of production are related to the institutional organization and activism of the working class. Port workers in Izmir were a more permanent workforce, rather than seasonal labor, and this, according to Berber's analysis allowed them to organize at a period when the Turkish working class was relatively unorganized. Moreover, Berber's analysis suggests that the lack of an overt political agenda reflects the emergent nature of a proletariat identity, rather than one formed enough to constitute collective political action.
- 19 Finally, Taylan Acar's article explores a very recent strike in the Antalya free trade zone. Drawing from the framing literature developed in the social movements literature, Acar focuses on the role of women workers. In particular, Acar's article examines how workers framed their actions as "a women's liberation issue." This extension from a working class to a feminist frame leads Acar to consider the possibility that this particular strike signals the emergence of a new collective identity of women workers - one that allows for feminist concerns to merge with more traditional working class concerns in ways that are potentially invigorating for both working class and feminist movements in Turkey.

Conclusion: Beyond a Special Issue

- 20 Taking these articles together, the Turkish labor movement appears neither as a passive recipient of state policies, nor as an idealized revolutionary proletariat. Rather, what emerges is a more complex understanding of the ways in which the Turkish labor

movement has emerged, changed over time, and affected the central concerns of Turkish political life. Moreover, the variety of topics addressed in these articles merely hint at the work that can still yet be done in (re)considering the labor movement in Turkey. Indeed, as I alluded to above, this special issue is best seen as part of a broader and hopefully growing effort to consider the labor movement in Turkey in a more nuanced, more theoretically engaged manner that is fairer to the history and complexity of the Turkish labor movement.

- 21 I hope this special issue serves to demonstrate the ways in which the labor movement in Turkey can provide a fruitful context for applying and testing important explanatory concepts and frameworks. From considerations of the moral economy to Weberian types of social action, from national security to framing processes, these articles highlight how the labor movement in Turkey provides a compelling context for the application of social science theory – with broadly comparative implications. In the end, the articles contained in this issue call us to reconsider the labor movement in Turkey as both an important aspect of modern Turkish politics, and as an ideal case within which to test and examine broader social science frameworks.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Goldberg, Ellis (ed.) (1996), the extensive work of Donald Quataert, the numerous historical volumes produced by Yildirim Koç and the recent December 2009 issue of the *International Review of Social History* focused on Ottoman and Republican Labor History.
2. For an overview of the strike wave that accompanied the Young Turk revolution of 1908, see Quataert (1983).
3. The 1872 date is in reference to a successful strike over wages at the Kasımpaşa Shipyards.
4. See, for example, Collier & Collier (1991), Murillo (2001), Fantasia & Voss (2004), Hattam (1993), Marks (1989), and Kume (1998), among countless others.

AUTEUR

BRIAN MELLO

Brian Mello is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Muhlenberg College. He earned his Ph.D. in 2006 at the University of Washington, Seattle. His areas of study include comparative politics, international relations, and the politics of social movements, with a regional specialization in the Middle East. bmello@muhlenberg.edu