

The Turkish labor market is a war zone, and workers its casualties

by Volodya Vagner - 27/01/2019 09:59



It is the first Sunday of December, and the offices of One Hope, a local neighbourhood association in Istanbul's Beyoglu district, are bustling with activity. A few dozen people of different ages and backgrounds are greeting one another, chatting, and getting ready to do what they come here to do, every first Sunday of each month. Though the atmosphere is cheery, the occasion which brings them together is a sombre one. As people are shuffling out the door onto the narrow alley outside, each of them carries a placard displaying a portrait of a parent, a spouse, a sibling, or a child, and the date and place of their deaths. These are the Workers' Families Seeking Justice, and together with supporters, they are here to hold yet another instalment of their monthly Vigil for Justice and Conscience, as they have for over ten years. What unites them is having lost a family member to Turkey's often lethal labour market.

The impetus for the vigil came in 2008. After an [explosion at a fireworks factory](#) killed

21 workers and injured over 100 in an industrial complex in Istanbul's Davutpasa neighbourhood, victims' families started holding regular vigils to draw attention to the case. While many of those gathered today are still relatives of those killed in Davutpasa, over the years they have been joined by others who suffered similar tragedies. One woman's sister was fatally injured by a truck as she was working on a TV set. Another man's teenage son was electrocuted while installing an advertisement billboard. Among their key demands is for business and municipal leaders who bear responsibility for their relatives' deaths to be punished— rather than low ranking health and safety officials being fined, as is usually the case.

The families insist that it isn't revenge that motivates them. Instead, they hope that pushing for accountability might end the impunity they feel contributes to the dangerous conditions at workplaces across Turkey. "We will be here until we see structural changes that lead to a decline in the number of workplace murders," a woman named Fadime Tayranoglu, who lost her husband in the Davutpasa explosion, explains.

At the moment, however, things seem to be headed in the opposite direction. According to the Health and Safety Labor Watch, an independent monitoring group, [the number of workplace deaths has been rising for the past three years, with over 2000 workers killed in 2017](#). As Asli Odman, a lecturer at Mimar Sinan University and volunteer-researcher with the Health and Safety Labor Watch, puts it on the sidelines of the vigil: "Going to work in Turkey is like going into a war zone."

As dramatic as this may sound, characterizing Turkish everyday civilian life, including labour issues, in militaristic terms has become increasingly apt, given President Erdogan's combative and polarizing approach to ruling the country. One manifestation of this martial atmosphere, the families complain, is the way they and others are increasingly being derided as "splitters", "traitors", or even "terrorists" for their pursuit of justice for their killed relatives. The authorities' attitude toward the vigil itself, too, is decidedly warlike. While the event used to be held on a little square along Istiklal Avenue, Istanbul's main shopping street, the families were banned from gathering there in September. To make sure they don't attempt to return to their usual spot today, the square is cordoned off, occupied by armoured crowd control vehicles and guarded by police carrying automatic weapons. The vigil is instead held on the little alley out front of One Hope's offices, closely observed by civilian-clad officers, filming the entire event.

With Erdogan's fractured Turkey becoming ever more marked by an atmosphere of war, one of its most crucial battlefields is certainly its construction sector – and not just in terms of worker casualties. Under the ruling AK party's reign, Turkey has been

experiencing an unprecedented building boom. Nowhere is this more visible than in Istanbul, where prestigious megaprojects like the city's new airport are but the tip of the iceberg – the Beyoglu area that is the city's cultural heart, has been undergoing a dramatic makeover as well. That the president himself wants his construction drive to be understood as something of a military campaign, is made clear in no subtle terms, in the official propaganda plastered all over the city. One massive billboard inside one of Istanbul's recently completed subway stations depicts the airport, which began operations this fall, accompanied by a quote from the President: "This is not just an airport, but also a monument to victory".

And it certainly is. Hardly anything over the past decade and a half has been more instrumental for, and reflective of Erdogan's steady ascent from Islamist outsider in a secular republic to an all-powerful ruler of the nation, as the construction industry in general— in particular, megaprojects like the airport. It is no coincidence that the biggest popular mobilization against Erdogan's regime, the Gezi uprising of 2013, which saw millions in the street in Istanbul and elsewhere, was triggered by opposition to the onslaught of construction projects changing the face of the country. While plans to replace Gezi Park, a green space adjacent to Beyoglu's main square of Taksim, with an Ottoman-era-themed shopping mall, became the spark that set everything in motion, the revolt wasn't so much about that specific project as the regime's authoritarian neoliberal approach to development as a whole. While a different government might have tried to soothe popular discontent through compromise, Erdogan responded by crushing the uprising, and though Gezi Park did end up being spared, other projects, like the airport, went ahead with full steam.

According to Mucella Yapici, Head of the Turkish Chamber of Architects' Environmental Impact Assessment Committee and Secretary of Taksim Solidarity, one of the Gezi protests' initial coordinating groups, there are several factors that make Erdogan's construction campaign so vital to his regime. For one, she explains over a drink in a café in Istanbul's Kadikoy neighbourhood, construction projects have become a way of creating a new class of loyal capitalists. "These projects became not only an engine for the Turkish economy, but also made a lot of the regime's friends really rich".

The perhaps best example of the nepotism that reigns in the Turkish construction sector is the destruction and reconstruction of the Beyoglu neighbourhood of Tarlabasi. The company that got the tender for the project belonged to Calik Holding Group, the CEO of which was Erdogan's son-in-law and protégé, Berat Albayrak. The powerful holdings, like Calik, that have grown out of the Turkish construction boom, Yapici continues, have in their turn become a means of further cementing Erdogan's

political power. Among the many other sectors that these consortiums now control, is much of Turkey's notoriously loyalist media.

Aside from thus bolstering the regime institutionally, much of the Turkish construction boom has also had an ideological dimension to it. "Many of these projects are about appeasing Erdogan's electoral base," Yapici says, a way to demonstrate that they are now in charge, both regionally and domestically. While the new airport, one of the largest in the world, is a "monument to victory" in Erdogan's quest to project more geopolitical might, the construction of a large mosque on Taksim Square – the traditional heart of secular, multiethnic, leftist Turkey – is a monument to his conservative movement's triumph over its foes at home. With so much invested in the battlefield that is construction, it is little wonder that it is also the deadliest sector of the Turkish economy.

According to the Health and Safety Labor Watch's figures, [around a quarter of all worker deaths occur in construction](#). "The high rate of circulation among construction workers, with many moving frequently, from one short term contract to the next, makes effective union organizing, and fighting for better conditions difficult," says Tezcan Acu, a construction worker and activist with the construction workers' union Insaat-Is. The importance attached to prestigious megaprojects, and their being completed on schedule, he explains, means that pressure on workers at these sites is particularly severe. If one is to believe official figures, [at least 52 workers have died building Istanbul's new airport, though according to independent reports, the true figure might be as high as 400](#). In September, only weeks before the pompous opening of the airport, workers revolted. [In response, hundreds of them, including some of Acu's union comrades, were detained by police](#). When an accident at a construction site of a stretch of highway near Istanbul killed three workers in late November, rather than allowing for transparency, the authorities responded with a reporting ban.

One factor in the authorities' increasing nervousness around labour conflicts in the construction industry might be that economic developments in 2018 have cast a dark shadow over this, perhaps most crucial of Erdogan's battlefields. With interest rates surging and the lira losing value throughout 2018, the construction boom the president has staked so much of his prestige to, appears to be heading for a crash, and risks taking much of the popularity he still enjoys among his base with it. While this might be a hopeful prospect in the long run, for now its effect seems to be even tougher conditions for both workers and government critics.