

## Labour Policies of the Centre Right in the Neoliberal Era: The True Path Party\*

Neoliberal Dönemde Merkez Sağ'da Emeğe Dair Politikalar: Doğru Yol Partisi

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### Abstract

This study examines the labour policies of the True Path Party (TPP) to better understand the centre-right's role in establishing neoliberalism in Turkey. Using a historical-comparative method, the article reveals significant changes in the Party's labour policies from its establishment in 1983 to Süleyman Demirel's Presidency (1983-1993). It is thought that a comparative examination of the period from the establishment of the Party to Demirel's Presidency can reveal the dilemmas and continuities experienced in the Party's labour policies depending on the neoliberal perspective. The TPP produced discourses aimed at gaining the support of labour immediately after its establishment in opposition to the structural conditions of the labour market in which it was born. These discourses expressed by the TPP are objections to the suppression of wage income, which is the most important element that ensures the sustainability of the accumulation process during the military rule (1980-1983) and the first civilian government following it and led by the Motherland Party. After becoming the head of the TPP (1987), Demirel brought to the fore the large inequalities in income distribution, argued for an effective labour market regulation to create full employment, and emphasised the relationship between poverty, wealth, and income distribution, which policymakers refrained from mentioning in the neoliberal process. However, during the Party's rule, it lost the support of many worker organisations, especially unions affiliated with Türk-İş.

**Keywords:** True Path Party, Labour Policies, Hüsametdin Cindoruk, Süleyman Demirel, Centre-right

### Öz

Çalışmada, Türkiye'de 1980'li yıllarda berraklaşan neoliberal hegemonya inşa mücadelesinde merkez sağın emeğe dair politikaları, Doğru Yol Partisi (DYP) merkeze alınarak incelenmiştir. Böylece neoliberal süreçte Parti'nin emek politikalarında yaşanan değişimin ortaya çıkarılması amaçlanmaktadır. Belirtilen amaca ulaşabilmek için çalışmada tarihsel karşılaştırmalı araştırma yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Partinin kuruluşundan Demirel'in Cumhurbaşkanlığına kadar geçen dönemin karşılaştırmalı olarak incelenmesinin, neoliberal bakış açısına bağlı olarak Parti'nin emek politikalarında yaşanan kopuklukları, ikilemleri ve süreklilikleri ortaya koyabileceği düşünülmektedir. DYP, içinde doğduğu emek piyasasına dair yapısal şartlara karşı, kuruluşundan hemen sonra emeğin desteğini almaya yönelik söylemler üretmiştir. DYP tarafından dile getirilen bu söylemler 24 Ocak ile başlayarak, cunta ve Anavatan Hükümeti tarafından devam ettirilen birikim sürecinin sürdürülebilirliğini sağlayan en önemli öge olan ücret gelirlerinin bastırılmasına bir karşı çıkış niteliğindedir. Demirel ise partinin başına geldikten sonra neoliberal süreçte politika yapıcıların söylemekten imtina ettiği gelir dağılımındaki büyük eşitsizlikleri, tam istihdamı yaratabilmek için gerekli işgücü piyasası yönetimini, yoksulluğun servet ve gelir dağılımı ile olan ilişkisini ön plana çıkartmıştır. Ancak Parti iktidarı süresince özellikle Türk-İş'e bağlı sendikalar başta olmak üzere, birçok işçi örgütlenmesinin desteğini kaybetmiştir. DYP vaat ettiği 12 Eylül'ün çalışma hayatına getirdiği izleri silmekten oldukça uzak kalmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Doğru Yol Partisi, Emek Politikaları, Hüsametdin Cindoruk, Süleyman Demirel, Merkez Sağ

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## Introduction

The True Path Party (TPP) was established under historical conditions that may seem similar at first glance to its predecessor, the Justice Party, and faced similar problems. Founded in 1961, the Justice Party took its place in the political scene after the Democrat Party was closed down after the 1960 military coup and managed to become its main heir. The True Path Party (1983) was also established after the 1980 military coup and tried to prove to its followers that it was the main heir of the Democrat Party-Justice Party tradition. However, this similarity that appeared at first glance under historical conditions revealed a completely different historical agenda when the strong structural changes that emerged in the global economy were considered. The values, assumptions, and ideas of neoliberalism, which were the dominant paradigm of the 1980s, were quite foreign to political parties before 1980.<sup>1</sup>

In this context, this study examines the labour policies of the TPP to better understand the role of the centre-right in the establishment of neoliberalism in Turkey. It reveals the significant changes in the labour policies of the party during the period from the establishment of the True Path Party to the Presidency of Süleyman Demirel (1983-1993). The selection of the TPP as the object of research in this study is based on the fact that the Party serves as a bridge connecting the pre- and post-1980 periods. The Party has been in decision-making positions during both the construction of neoliberal hegemony in the 1980s and the crisis of neoliberal hegemony in the 1990s. While tracing the labour policies of the TPP will, on the one hand, reveal the impact of the post-1980 neoliberal perspective on labour policies, it will also make visible the objections coming from a section of the centre-right against the neoliberal perspective and the potential of this section to have a positive impact on the mobilisation of organised labour. Additionally, this review will help us understand the changing face of TPP in its labour policies after coming to power.

In this respect, the aim of this research is to reveal what kind of change took place in the party's policies regarding labour in the neoliberal process and what effect the party's discourse and actions had on the gains of labour in this period. To achieve the stated purpose, a historical comparative research method was used in the study. The fact that the historical comparative research method is suitable for making sense of the combination of social factors (Neuman, 2013, pp.604-616) reveals the necessity of adopting such a method in this study, which aims to make sense of a certain period. In order to systematically make sense of the True Path Party's approach to labour policies during the opposition and government periods, reliable data were sought through historical comparative analysis. In particular, historical processes were elaborated through case studies, and concrete historical details were examined in depth.

In this context, the research argument is as follows: 'In the period from the founding of the Party to Demirel's Presidency, the Party's discourse and policies regarding labour differed from the Motherland Party, another centre-right force. The True Path Party's

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1 Kaya Erdem, Minister of Finance during the period (1983-1989), emphasised that academics, bureaucrats, and politicians of the period were far from the needs of an export-oriented economy. According to Erdem, the report requested by the World Bank during this period, which showed what kind of subsidies would be applied to exports in the country, could not be provided by the State Planning Organisation and universities due to a lack of knowledge on this subject (Sağım Solum Tarih, 24.01.2016).

reference to both the social state approach and full employment, differentiating itself from the ruling Motherland Party during the opposition period, emphasises the import substitution development model. This attitude of the TPP, at a time when both the social state and the concept of full employment were being eroded, was, on the one hand, related to the strength of the labour movement in this period, and on the other hand, it was based on the centre-right's perspective from the political economy of the 1960s. This situation enabled the Party to gain the consent of many workers' organisations, especially unions affiliated with the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions<sup>2</sup> (Türk-İş), while the Party was in opposition. However, the strategic selectivity<sup>3</sup> applied by the TPP towards labour when it was in power caused unions' support for the TPP to decrease day by day. During this period, the TPP began the process of articulation with neoliberal labour policies.<sup>4</sup> In this study, the discourses of the Party elites and the Party policies are systematically discussed on a historical basis through the Party's printed documents and newspapers of the period (Tercüman, Cumhuriyet, Milliyet, 1983-1993). It is possible to find a very rich field of study in the literature dealing with labour policies between 1983 and 1993 (Adaman, Buğra and Insel, 2009; Akkaya, 1999; Boratav, 1990; Boratav, Yeldan and Köse, 2000; Cam, 2002; Doğan, 2020; Doğan, 2018; Doğan, 2015; Karahanoğulları, 2019; Özgün, 2014; Yeldan, 1995). However, it can be said that these studies do not comparatively analyse the change in a party and the resulting transformation in the party's relations with labour. As a matter of fact, the original aspect of the study is the comparative analysis of the TPP's relations with labour in different periods and, in this context, revealing the transformation in the party's mechanisms of persuading its voters.

### **Historical Background**

The True Path Party was founded on the thesis that it was the continuation of the centre-right tradition, at a time when moves towards the establishment of neoliberal hegemony were intensifying. This situation necessitates that the study of the True Path Party should focus on the dominant neoliberal parameters in Turkey at the time the True Path Party was legally born. The January 24 Decisions,<sup>4</sup> symbolised as a turning point in Turkey's transition to neoliberalism, expected an export-based accumulation strategy. The Programme determined the structural framework of the transition from Keynesian to monetarist economic policies. The first steps of this framework were the devaluation of the Turkish lira, the removal of control mechanisms on prices and restrictions on imports, the liberalisation of trade, and the promotion of exports (Baysan ve Blitzer, 1990, p.10). Although no direct reference to the labour market in the programme, the transition to an export-oriented growth model and the creation of a surplus value in this context necessitated a reduction in wages and a restriction of domestic demand. In this respect, the Programme had a perspective that enabled the transformation of class relations by strengthening international and domestic capital against labour. In this way, on the one hand, an opportunity was created for domestic capital, strengthened by protectionist

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2 Founded in 1952, it is Turkey's largest labour confederation.

3 The struggle between political and social actors determines which actors, identities, and action governments will privilege. Jessop (2005, p.173) calls this situation strategic selectivity.

4 A neoliberal programme, known as the "January 24 Decisions," was introduced in Turkey for the first time in 1980.

economic policies, to compete in the international market, and on the other hand, international capital was encouraged to invest in the country (Özgün, 2014, pp.91-93).

As a matter of fact, the regulation of the labour market was a priority on the agenda of the 1980 military regime, which played a vital role in the applicability of the January 24 Decisions, along with political authoritarianism and depoliticisation. Class-based politics, which was seen as a tumour for the junta administration, which attributed the current crisis to the political strength of the working class, had to be ended (Akça, 2011, p.28; Yalman, 2004, pp.44-50). In this context, the first thing the junta did was to eliminate collective structures that could hinder the market perspective by closing down major union confederations, except the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (Türk-İş), which was far from radical unionism. The measures taken against the Progressive Trade Union Confederation of Turkey (DISK) were particularly severe. The Confederation's assets were confiscated, and its leaders were tried for the death penalty (Adaman, Buğra ve İnel, 2009, pp.173-174). In fact, this attitude adopted against DISK was also an indicator of the hostility towards the class-centred organisational mobility of labour. As a result, union density decreased from 27% in 1979 to 9.5% in 1985 (Cam, 2002, p.108). In addition, the 1982 Constitution and the 1983 Labour Law, the status of wage labour vis-à-vis capital. Because the Labour Law that was put into effect has seriously narrowed the limits of the right to strike and limited action to collective bargaining disputes. In this case, the strike could have been banned and postponed. For example, strikes approved by military authorities were postponed for reasons that could be flexible in any direction, such as 'national security'. Although unions were prohibited from engaging in political activities or having formal or informal relations with political parties, the Supreme Arbitration Board, which was established to resolve disputes between employees and employers, took on the task of keeping wage demands under control (Yeldan, 1995, pp.54-55). It consisted of members, five from the state bureaucracy, two from Türk-İş, one from the Turkish Confederation of Employer Associations (TİSK), and one from the state as an employer. This membership profile ensured the sustainability of the government policy, which centred on austerity. For example, wage settlements could be regularly made at nominal increases below annual inflation rates (Boratav, 1990, pp.209-210).

With all these interventions, on the one hand, surplus value rates could be increased, and on the other hand, organised labour was removed from the political sphere and deprived of political pressure. As a matter of fact, a comparison with the late 1970s more clearly reveals the rapid decline in wages after 24 January and therefore the increase in surplus value rates. Between 1975 and 1979, organised labour was able to increase its share of industrial value added from 28% to 37% by constantly increasing wage demands (Yeldan, 1995, p.48). On the other hand, the real wage of a worker who earned 1851 TL in the manufacturing industry in 1979 dropped to 1422 TL in 1980, whereas a worker who earned 1656 TL in the private sector in 1979 could earn 1198 TL in 1980 (Karahanoğulları, 2019, p.435). In the three years under the junta rule, real wages followed a moderate course with a slight increase rate. This model of military social relations was also compatible with the demands expressed by TİSK before the coup. In the late 1970s, TİSK complained about the participation of unions in politics, wage increases, short working hours, union pluralism, and the lack of legal criteria to prevent strikes. Similarly, during this period,

the IMF was proposing suspending the collective bargaining system for five years. Thus, the coup restructured the institutional structure between labour and capital in favour of employers (Doğan, 2020, pp.169-179; Doğan, 2018, pp.264-266).

### **The Centre of Resistance Against Neoliberal Labour Policies on the Centre-Right: Hüsametdin Cindoruk Era**

The Özal administration does not respect labour. Inflation affects workers' pockets.

Hüsametdin Cindoruk (DYP 1. Büyük Kongresi Raporlar, 1985)

After the coup, the parties were allowed to return to the political scene in Turkey in April 1983. Even after the transition to democracy, the authoritarian attitude towards labour continued. The transition to civilian rule did not lead to the removal of the restrictions imposed by the 1982 Constitution and the laws enacted by the military administration on the democratic rights and freedoms of the working class (Bedirhanoğlu ve Yalman, 2010, pp.111-113). Even though the military rule was over, 24 Decisions were in power, and the policies of the January 24 were still in effect. The pro-market policy implemented by the Motherland Party Government made temporary employment a norm day by day, and the contracted personnel and subcontractor system was increasingly moving to the centre of employment policies. This mechanism, which does not provide a guarantee against dismissals, started with the recruitment of white-collar workers as contracted personnel before privatisation, and was later expanded to blue-collar workers (Boratav, 1990, pp.209-212; Cam, 2002, pp.95-97; Yörük, 2018, pp.320-322).

The reduced possibility of finding a secure job caused a kind of disintegration in the moral economy of workers. The government, on the other hand, fed this disintegration through mechanisms such as publicly announced lockouts, the vilification of workers fighting for their rights, the smearing of SOEs, an increase in the retirement age, the establishment of free zones where strikes were banned for 10 years, and reductions in wages. During this period, there was a continuity in the junta administration's and the civil administration's perspective on the unions. The ruling Motherland Party Government not only did not tolerate union activities but also approached unions with a hostile attitude. This signified a new relationship style for an organisation that had a tradition of conducting business through informal ties with politicians and relying on lobbying activities to improve the rights of its members (Doğan, 2020, pp.138-140). In the political arena of the 1960s, the close relations established with the centre-right tradition played an important role in political bargaining, and thus the centre-right gained the support of many unionist groups within Turk-Is. Because of this mutualist relationship, 4 union leaders in Türk-İş were elected as members of parliament from the Justice Party list in the 1965 elections (Demirel, 2017). The Motherland Party Government, on the other hand, rendered this populist policy unfounded. The summits held every three months between members of the government headed by the Prime Minister and the largest trade union confederation in the 1960s and 1970s were reduced to a minimum during the Motherland Party Government from November 1983 to October 1991, and Türk-İş's search for dialogue generally resulted negatively (Önder, 2016, pp.31-32).

Faced with this new attitude, the Union first wanted to revive its old habits and communicate with the centre-right opposition. During this period, the closure case filed

against the centre-right representative TPP, which originated in the 1960s, had just been rejected by the Constitutional Court, and the party was approved for continuing its political life. However, the close contact that Türk-İş wanted to establish with the TPP got stuck with the Public Prosecutor's Office. 17 union presidents, who paid a courtesy visit to Chairman Hüsametdin Cindoruk<sup>5</sup> after the 1st Grand Congress of the TPP, were summoned to testify on the grounds that they were involved in politics (Cumhuriyet, 05.06.1985). It could be seen that behind this attitude lay the fear of establishing a dialogue that could revive old norms between the TPP, which is the continuation of the Justice Party, and Türk-İş. Because TPP increased the dose of its discourse aimed at gaining the support of labour immediately after its establishment in contrast to the structural conditions of the labour market in which it was born. This situation was the main source of motivation for the rapprochement between the Party and Türk-İş. As a matter of fact, at the 1st Grand Council Meeting of the TPP, held on February 4, 1984, Ziya Hepbir (DYP 1. Büyük Divan Toplantısı (1984), one of the founders of the Party, who was also a trade unionist, expressed the problems of workers and unions as follows:

With the amendment made in Law No. 506, the retirement conditions of workers have become more difficult. Workers' housing loans have increased from 5% to 15%. Workers treated on an outpatient basis are charged a 20% drug fee. The weight and effectiveness of workers in the management of social security institutions have been reduced. The Trade Union Law No. 2821 made it difficult for workers to become members of the union by introducing the requirement to become a member through a notary... It placed limits on the activities of union leaders... Law No. 2822 does not allow workers to exercise their right to collective bargaining, which is their only means of protecting their rights in return for their labour. The right to collective bargaining, which seems to exist on paper, has been rendered inoperative by the restrictions imposed... The right to strike has also been made obsolete by the same law. As a result of the reduction of national and general holidays by 5.5 days, the income earned by workers from the work they do on these days has been eliminated... The purchasing power of workers has declined... No effort is being made to re-determine the minimum wage.

The Party's approach to workers' problems was remarkable in the five declarations prepared to be delivered to the public in open air and hall meetings to be held in the provinces and districts for the local elections of 25 March 1984. According to the Party, the government stood by and turned its back on workers' rightful demands for higher wages. Employees' social rights are being taken away for various reasons. The Party also emphasised the suppression of wages in its rallies, claiming that workers were earning less than what they had been receiving 15 years ago. Minimum wages should be redetermined and wages should be increased fairly. On the other hand, the government was irresponsibly spending state resources on importing luxury goods and aiding bankrupt companies and was committing injustice by turning its back on workers' rights (Sosyal Devlet Mitingi Beyannamesi, İşte Doğru Yol Mitingi Beyannamesi, Doğru Yol Partisi 1 Yaşında, 1984).

The decline in real wages of labour was discussed more comprehensively at the Party's Grand Congress (1985) and was expressed with examples from real life that the worker felt every day: "While an unskilled worker who has been working for 3 years had to work

5 Hüsametdin Cindoruk began his political career in the Democrat Party and continued his political career in the Justice Party. After the coup and with the closure of the Justice Party, he was subject to compulsory residence by the National Security Council. He was elected chairman of the TPP on May 14, 1985.

3 hours 36 minutes in 1980 to buy 1 kg of beef, he had to work 8 hours 21 minutes in 1985. The same worker had to work 2 h 44 min in 1980 and 7 h 49 min in 1985 to buy 1 kg of white cheese. In the last year, the real income of workers has decreased by 2 times” (DYP 1. Büyük Kongresi Raporlar, 1985). The statements of Hüsamettin Cindoruk, who was elected as the Chairman of the Party at the congress, almost created the feeling that the TPP would provide the political environment of the 1960s for workers:

Turkish workers are devastated. TPP has clear promise to Turkish workers. Interventions against the free collective bargaining agreement system, which is the most important basis for evaluating the reward of our workers’ labour, will be eliminated... Necessary measures will be taken to ensure that the right to strike is exercised without interference. Attitudes and behaviours that make retirement more difficult aim to eliminate the right to severance pay, and acquired workers’ rights are opposed. By establishing the necessary legal regulations to regulate the minimum wage according to current conditions, the minimum wage will cease to be a poverty wage (DYP 1. Büyük Kongresi Raporlar, 1985).

As a matter of fact, before the 1986 midterm elections, the Party was promising workers that they would not settle for development with cheap labour, and that union and collective bargaining rights would be rearranged and workers would be compensated for their efforts. In addition, it was stated that changes in line with a democratic system would be made in the Trade Union Law<sup>6</sup> and the Collective Labour Agreement, Strike and Lockout Law<sup>7</sup>, and that the minimum wage would be excluded from taxes and that supports to increase the purchasing power of workers’ wages would be provided (DYP 1986 Ara Seçim Beyannamesi, 1986; DYP’nin Doğru Görüşünden Parçalar, 1985). During this period, unions showed great interest in events such as meetings, symposiums and conferences organised by the Party, and the similarity between the discourses of the TPP and unions increased daily. The speech made by Trade Unionist Nuri Sabahçı at the “Youth and Greater Turkey Symposium” organised by the Party was a kind of expression of this similarity (Doğru Yol Partisi Gençlik ve Büyük Türkiye Sempozyumu, 1986).

With Trade Union Law No. 2821, the Collective Bargaining Agreement, Strike and Lockout Law No. 2822 were enacted to the detriment of employees by making radical changes. These laws need to be revised for employees... In a comparison among OECD member countries, Turkey ranks first in terms of wage-price imbalance. In recent years, this imbalance has worsened to the detriment of employees... Real wages fell by 35% compared to 1980... The factors that are reflected to the consumer and accelerate inflation to some extent through the prices increased by employers actually arise from the price policy followed by employers, not from the wage policy followed by unions. Employer and capital circles and the government want to blame rising prices on wage increases and say that this prevents investments and increases prices...

In fact, all the discourses expressed by the TPP and Türk-İş were objections to the suppression of wage income, the most important element that ensured the sustainability of the accumulation process that started on January 24 and was continued by the Motherland Party Government. Real wages fell by 52.1% for all workers between 1979 and 1985, whereas this decline was 28.6% for manufacturing workers. When looking at labour productivity during this period, positive growth rates were noticeable, which revealed that workers’ wages decreased much more than the value they added (Boratav, 1990,

6 No. 2821.

7 No. 2822.

pp.207-208). Similarly, the share of wage income in GDP decreased from 33% in 1979 to 18% in 1985 (Celasun, 1990, p.42). Thus, while national competitiveness was increased by keeping wages under pressure, capital accumulation, the cost of which was largely paid by labour, could be continued.

The government, on the other hand, had to resort to authoritarianism increasingly day by day to protect this fundamental claim on which the accumulation regime it implemented was based. As a matter of fact, with the regulation coming into force after being published in the Official Gazette on January 4, 1986, advisory boards to be formed under the chairmanship of governors and district governors could take measures to prevent the formation of crowds in strike areas, and workers could not organise meetings or entertainment during strikes. Strike spokesmen were required to be reported to the civil authorities, and banners such as “There is a strike in this workplace” were prohibited from being hung in workplaces. In addition to all these, the fact that gendarmerie and commando units, as well as local security forces, could be used in strikes under the statute demonstrated the government’s fear of the workers’ political mobilisation in this period. In June 1985, the Government increased the authority of the police over meetings held by unions in accordance with Law No. 3233.

Türk-İş Chairman Şevket Yılmaz opposed this regulation as follows: “Turkey is being turned into a police state in the name of democracy. In addition to these restrictions, the statute makes strikes virtually impossible. As a precaution, the administration will apply pressure and violence, similar to the practise in countries where state terrorism is dominant, with its gendarmerie, police, and special strikebreaking forces formed under the name of the ‘ready force’.” In response, governors postponed the protest rallies that Türk-İş was planning to hold in Manisa, Samsun, Gaziantep, and Zonguldak, claiming that they could disrupt public order. With his response to this decision made by the authorities, “We are being forced to do illegal things, democracy is becoming questionable”, Yılmaz was, in a way, admitting the need for the militancy of labour, which Türk-İş was not used to at all (Tercüman, 05.09.1986-15.09.1986).

In the same period, Cindoruk spoke to the workers in Zonguldak, where Türk-İş could not organise a rally, and in a way, he represented Türk-İş through his discourses. According to Cindoruk, the Özal administration did not respect labour and made the workers’ struggle for survival difficult because of inflation. The government remained silent despite the cries of workers who had become 50% poorer in the last 5 years. On the other hand, while the Prime Minister was establishing close relations with employers, he was refraining from giving even 10 minutes to labour leaders. Özal wanted to eliminate workers’ rights and tried to provoke workers against unions. Cindoruk called the governors who postponed Türk-İş meetings as ‘partisans’ and stated that these practises would suit the head of an employer union rather than a Prime Minister (Tercüman, 17.09.1986). Similar to Cindoruk, Türk-İş President Yılmaz said a few days later, “If peace and tranquillity are truly desired in the country, the Prime Minister must realise that he is not a representative of an employer union” (Tercüman, 22.09.1986). Thus, perhaps for the first time in the country’s political history, both the centre-right opposition and the top of the Türk-İş were accusing the government of defending favouring the capitalist class. A few days later, it was brought to the agenda that the criterion of implementing non-partisan

policies within Türk-İş had become obsolete and that workers were asked not to give a vote of confidence to this government in the by-elections to be held in 10 provinces on September 28, 1986 (Tercüman, 26.09.1986).

The rapprochement between Türk-İş and TPP was increasing with the congresses of Türk-İş in 1986. In a way, these congresses could be read as self-criticism of the coup period, during which unionists who praised the coup period were liquidated one by one. Members such as Mustafa Başoğlu and Çetin Göçer, who were elected to the administration in their place, were closely associated with the TPP. Although the new administration consisted of moderates, it displayed an oppositional stance against the ruling party. This perspective clearly emerged in the referendum on restoring the political rights of banned politicians. The Confederation offered unconditional support for lifting the prohibition. It was known that the closeness of Yılmaz and his friends to former Prime Minister Demirel, who would return to the political arena after the ban was lifted, played an important role in this support given by Türk-İş. After the narrow victory, former politicians along with Demirel were invited back to the political stage, and some union leaders' efforts to join the TPP increased (Doğan, 2020, pp.225-236).

### **Guarantee of Unions: Demirel is in Opposition**

“[Demirel] will become a communist if there is another coup.”

Aziz Nesin

The results of the referendum<sup>8</sup> not only restored the political rights of the banned politicians but also encouraged the Özal administration that it could continue its power through an early election. In this context, the government decided to hold general elections in 1987, without giving the former leaders the opportunity to organise strong opposition. After Demirel became the head of the Party, TPP continued its supportive attitude towards labour. In its 1987 election manifesto, the Party defended full employment, declaring that it would eliminate unemployment through industrialisation. The Party stated that workers had to work more or consume less every day in order to survive, and emphasised that income inequality affected millions of people who fell below the poverty line in the country, and that many workers continued to live below the poverty line even after receiving their salaries. While doing so, it was striking that the Party addressed the dimensions of poverty through the language of numbers and revealed the deprivation deemed suitable for workers in daily life: “A worker who could buy 1 kg of meat by working 4 hours and 30 minutes in 1980 was forced to work 2 hours and 40 minutes longer to buy the same meat in 1987”. In addition, the Party addressed workers as follows in its 1987 election manifesto (DYP 1987 Seçim Beyannamesi, 1987):

Our Working Brothers:

You, too, bore the brunt of the inflation policies. Increases in your wages lagged behind inflation. Restrictions have been placed on your collective bargaining and union rights... Under the TPP government, the right to collective bargaining and union rights will be adopted as the basic institutions of the free democratic order. Collective agreements will be established between employee and employer unions without resorting to administrative

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8 The session was held on September 6, 1987, to discuss whether the 10- and 5-year political bans imposed by temporary Article 4 of the 1982 Constitution should be lifted.

intervention by the state. Unions will be able to work with full freedom to protect workers' rights and interests of economic and social nature. All restrictions on union elections and management will be eliminated. With the belief that the right to collective bargaining is extremely useful and sufficient for determining workers' wage levels and social rights, a development policy based on cheap labour will not be allowed. Workers' wages in the public sector will never be allowed to lag behind inflation, and the private sector will be supported in the same direction, provided that the right to collective bargaining is retained. The minimum wage will be at least 100,000 TL at today's prices and will be completely tax-exempt. Workers will be given free notebooks, pencils, and books for their primary and secondary school children... Unemployment insurance will begin... General regulations will be made for the benefit of all workers.

As such, TPP highlighted large inequalities in income distribution and the need to create full employment and drew attention to the relationship between poverty and income distribution, which policymakers refrained from mentioning in the neoliberal process. Therefore, the party highlighted the political economy of the 1960s characterised by a Keynesian policy framework.<sup>9</sup> In this context, the TPP promised to reduce the tax burden on fixed income earners, and insurance and tax amounts would be excluded from the net minimum wage payment. This Party attitude was also accepted by Türk-İş, and Türk-İş executives stated that they saw Demirel as the guarantor of their union (Tercüman, 17.08.1988).

Demirel's opening speech at the TPP Regular Grand Congress almost expressed his longing for a compromise established between capital and labour in the Keynesian economic model. According to Demirel, the government of the period made a wrong choice between labour and capital by reducing the effectiveness of labour and placing profit and productivity on the back of labour. The economic and social rights of workers and employers can only be protected through free trade unionism. On the other hand, the government was suppressing union voices and causing the collective bargaining system to fail. Thus, working life is a scene of unfair practises. Demirel stated that the government could not bring permanent solutions to working life without changing the Trade Union Law and the Collective Bargaining Agreement, Strike, and Lockout Law, which remained unchanged since the time of military rule (DYP Olağan Büyük Kongresi, 1988).

However, the government did not share the same thoughts with Demirel. The government hoped that it can gain support from non-collective, individualised labour by creating a populist wave without touching neoliberal disciplinary mechanisms. In 1988, the government's growth strategy, which was based on the suppression of wages, depreciation of the TL, and the granting of significant subsidies to exports, reached its political and economic limits. National income per capita declined for two consecutive years, and the inflation rate reached 75%. The decline in real wage rates reached 25% between 1980 and 1988, whereas real profits reported by the 500 largest companies almost doubled during this period. It was becoming increasingly difficult to establish reactionary distribution policies on which the model was based sustainable in the current field of social struggle (Yeldan, 1995, pp.54-55; Boratav, Yeldan ve Köse, 2000, p.3; Boratav ve Yeldan, 2001, pp.5-6). As a matter of fact, the 1989 local elections showed once again

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9 In the Keynesian period, increasing welfare policies and achieving full employment occupied an important place in competition between parties (Jessop, 2005, pp.281-282).

that the Motherland Party was losing power. While one of the main interconnected factors in this loss of votes and reputation is the emergence of different political options in the political arena with the return of banned politicians, another was that it broke the silence of the working class against the neoliberal policies put into place. These two dynamics, supporting each other, played an important role in the disintegration of the Motherland's power.

Just before the 1989 local elections, the negative outcome of the collective bargaining negotiations held by public workers affiliated with Türk-İş with public employers initiated a collective mobilisation called "Spring Actions". There were creative methods in the action repertoire of the movement, which was attended by nearly 600,000 workers and sometimes gained a spontaneous character: "work slowdown, late start of work, mass visits, service and food boycott, beard boycott, silent march, work stoppage, sit-in, road closure to traffic, mass divorce application" (Saraçoğlu, 2019, p.807). The strikes were also supported by the TPP. Demirel, who visited Türk-İş in early March in 1989, emphasised that "almost all working people in Turkey are below the poverty line." According to Demirel, the government's wage increases below the inflation rate were hindering social peace and causing great problems within the country along with increasing unemployment (Cumhuriyet, 03.04.1989-04.04.1989). Türk-İş President Yılmaz, on the other hand, complained about the government to Demirel, stating that the government had not fulfilled any of its promises so far. However, Türk-İş remained away from the "no vote for Motherland Party" style of behaviour that it had adopted against the government in previous elections and referendums (Cumhuriyet, 06.04.1989-10.04.1989). Özal, on the other hand, initially took an attitude towards this situation, blaming the workers' organisations and ignoring the demands of the unions. Because, as Doğan (2020, p.254) stated, "the austerity policy was the trademark of the Özal administration, and if there was no election defeat on the horizon, the government had no intention of throwing this principle aside." However, the loss of votes in the local elections of March 1989 caused chaos in the Motherland government, and State Minister Cemil Çiçek, as the minister responsible for public collective agreements, was assigned to direct negotiations with Türk-İş. During this period, losses in Iron and Steel alone due to strikes reached 600 billion (Milliyet, 12.08.1989).

The current process forced the government to adopt populist regulations. As a matter of fact, at a time when the inflation rate was 75%, the Motherland Party Government was willing to give public employees a 141% wage increase. Thus, the 10-year period of decline in real wages, which had now become permanent, came to an end. However, the question that needed to be answered this point was how this distribution shock could be financed. In other words, how would the phenomenon of "giving to labour/the poor without taking from capital/the rich" be handled? The answer for the period was the liberalisation of the capital account. Increased capital inflows due to the convertibility of TL enabled the increasing distribution demands to be met without giving rise to huge increases in inflation and at the same time alleviate inflationary pressures by cheapening import costs. However, this situation would open the door to crises that would arise later with the reversal of capital accounts (Boratav, Yeldan ve Köse, 1999, pp.28-29). As a result of the congresses held in the second half of 1989, Türk-İş was securing itself

against the cracks in the Motherland Party Government and was adapting its headquarters to a new government that had not yet been established. Because the new headquarters of Türk-İş resembled a coalition sympathetic to the TPP.

The political mobilisation of labour, which rose with the 1989 Spring Actions, reached its peak again with the resistance of Zonguldak mine workers towards the end of 1990.<sup>10</sup> The dispute stemmed from the failure to conclude collective agreement negotiations between the General Mine Workers' Union affiliated with Türk-İş and the Turkish Hard Coal Enterprises. However, the basis of the disagreement was that the Özal administration did not consider the coal basin to have investable standards under international competition conditions. The mines that had been producing coal for 161 years were wanted to be closed down due to high costs. Against this, approximately 48,000 workers, who were not accustomed to market conditions, decided to strike, and Demirel declared that he supported the mine workers, saying "it is foolishness to make inflation a state policy and then say that we did not crush the workers" (Cumhuriyet, 30.11.1990). The Party stated that it was behind Türk-İş's decision not to work on January 3 and its decision to walk from Zonguldak to Ankara on January 4. After the Ankara Labour Court deemed the January 3 protest illegal, Demirel said, "It is not possible to consider the actions of hundreds of thousands of people as a crime and impose penalties." According to Demirel, the main issue to focus on was the dynamics that forced the workers to participate in such a movement. The workers mobilisation, in his view, was a manifestation of the problems of the people (Cumhuriyet, 01.12.1990-07.01.1991). However, the rising class struggle was interrupted by an extraordinary situation on January 26, 1991. The Zonguldak miners' strike was postponed because of the Gulf War (Cumhuriyet, 27-28.01.1991). The figure agreed upon because of subsequent negotiations was lower than the figure offered by the government a few months ago. Despite this, real wages of public workers increased by approximately 200% between 1989 and 1991 (Yeldan, 1995, p.56).

The culmination of TPP's effort to convince labour of its own hegemony project was the 1991 election manifesto titled "A New Turkey on the Morning of October 21". With its election manifesto, the party virtually attacked the neoliberal disciplinary mechanisms implemented by the Motherland Party Government against labour. According to the programme (DYP Seçim Bildirgesi, 1991), the existing government, with its unfair policies, passed over workers like a tank, creating livelihood problems instead of welfare. In particular, income inequality caused by neoliberal policies was systematically addressed in the programme: "It is known that in Turkey, the top 10% receive 43% of the Gross National Product (GNP). This situation puts our country among the 8 countries with the worst income distribution among the 121 countries in the world..."

In addition, the Party's strategy regarding real wages differed from the government's perspective of suppressing wages. The Party did not see real wages and salaries as the main reason for chronic inflation and therefore believed that the fight against inflation would not pit labour and capital against each other. Because the share of labour in GNP was already much lower than in western countries. In order to reduce public debt, salaries

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10 According to the number of strikes and the number of workers participating, 1990 was a boom year. For detailed information on strike participation and the number of working days lost during strikes between 1985 and 1997, see: Akkaya, 1999, pp.4-5.

and wages, which are important items of public expenditure, would not be restricted; on the contrary, they would be updated according to current conditions, and the living standards of wage earners would be raised. The tax burden of the wage earner segment will not be increased, and this gap will be closed with taxes allocated from other segments in proportion to income. The minimum wage will be excluded from taxes and will also be exempted from new taxes.

The Party's perspective on working life was based on updating the state structure, which was institutionalised through both the 1982 Constitution and the basic laws put into effect by September 12. In this context, the Party emphasised that the regulations, practises and restrictions, which it described as the September 12 law would be quickly abolished and a fully democratic employee-employer environment would be established. For this purpose, obstacles to workers' rights and freedoms are removed, and a market economy that improves workers' living conditions and centres on the principles of the social state and social justice is implemented. Stating that a harmonious system would be established in employee-employer relations brought corporatism to mind. However, stating that the Trade Unions Law, the Collective Labour Agreement Strike Lockout Law, and the Labour Law<sup>11</sup> regarding working life would be amended in a way compatible with the democratic regime, brought the Party closer to a solidarist corporatism.<sup>12</sup> In addition, while it was heralded in the Declaration that the working hours of professional groups working under harsh conditions, such as mining, would be shortened, priority would be given to a balanced income distribution and the spread of wealth among the base in order to ensure labour peace. Payment appropriate to human dignity, unemployment insurance, and social insurance coverage for everyone were among the objectives of the Party. Thus, one of the main objectives was to correct the balance that was disturbed by workers after 24 January (21 Ekim Sabahı Yeni Bir Türkiye, 1991).

However, how this populist rhetoric used both in the election manifesto (1991) and in the squares would be shaped as a result of power relations, conflicts of interest, and social struggles at different spatial scales. Considering the country's integration into capitalism and the resulting inadequacy in domestic and foreign savings rates, the argument that the share of labour in GNP could be brought to western standards and sustainable economic growth could be maintained seemed quite ambitious. An important question mark was how the capital-labour conflict would be replaced by harmonious working relations within the free market economy that TPP claimed to defend. As a matter of fact, these contradictory claims by the party were also reflected in the results of the general election held on October 20, 1991. TPP was the leading party in the 10 wealthiest provinces, which received the largest share of national income, and in the 10 poorest provinces, which received the smallest share (Milliyet, 08.11.1991). The government formed by the TPP and the Social Democratic People's Party (SPP), which attacked the neoliberal hegemony project of the Motherland Party from the right and left after the general elections, under the Prime Ministership of Demirel, known for his motto "yesterday is yesterday, today is today" (Bora, 2018), gave the chance to test all these promises while in opposition.

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11 No. 1475.

12 Solidarist corporatism is a solidarity approach that opposes class separation and, at the same time, advocates equality of interests between classes. For a detailed explanation of solidarist corporatism, see (Parla, 2009, pp.97-112). Taha Parla also defines the policies of the Social Democratic People's Party (SPP), which was the main opposition party in 1989, as "solidarist corporatism". (Parla, 2009, p.11).

## Articulation to Neoliberalism: Demirel is in Power

“Slave order, slave order, down with the Demirel order”.

Türk-İş

The TPP and SPP promised social justice to workers oppressed during the neoliberal structural adjustment process. Organised labour had a significant role in the success of both parties in the elections. The social opposition directed against the neoliberal policies, which started with the January 24 decisions and continued uninterruptedly with the junta administration and then the Özal government, spread to other parts of the country in waves under the leadership of organised labour, as Denizer<sup>13</sup> stated in Zonguldak (Cumhuriyet, 01.12.1990). Now, the country’s largest labour confederation, Türk-İş, which had a major share in the organisation of this opposition, announced that the promises made by the TPP and SPP to labour were almost the same. According to the Confederation, SPPs and TPPs could offer more consistent and balanced solutions to the problems of the working class (Cumhuriyet, 24.10.1991).

However, the coalition was not very successful in its first test. The 25-30% increase in the salaries of civil servants and pensions in the new year, in an environment where inflation reached 70%, was not found sufficient by civil servant organisations such as the Labour Union of the Labourers of Education and Science. The unions stated that the government did not keep its promise to them and announced that they would respond to the government through organised actions. As a matter of fact, soon civil servant actions spread in the centre of the demand for union rights, with strikes and collective bargaining agreements, and 7 civil servant unions decided to organise rallies under the name of “union rights of public employees” in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir on January 26 (Cumhuriyet, 01.01.1992-08.01.1992).<sup>14</sup>

During this period, Türk-İş Chairman Yılmaz repeated his wishes for civil servants to be accorded union rights that covered all freedoms. In addition, Yılmaz reminded that just a month after coming to power, the government described price increases in a wide range of items—from basic needs to general consumer goods—as inevitable; therefore, the government made statements demanding sacrifices from all segments of society. However, according to Yılmaz, “Sacrifice cannot be demanded from poor budgets for years, from the masses of people who have been oppressed under economic policies and are increasingly driven to despair.” With this discourse, Türk-İş was stating in advance to the government that it did not want to encounter such an attitude in the collective agreements covering 623,651 workers to be made during the year. The Confederation gave the government until the end of May to change its constitutional and legal provisions regarding working life, as promised before the election (Cumhuriyet, 06.01.1992).

On the other hand, right after Yılmaz’s statements, Demirel organised a meeting with the participation of 32 union managers from 28 business lines that make up the Türk-İş Presidential Board and agreed to hold similar meetings frequently with the participation of himself and a minister. In response to Yılmaz’s statement, “We will continue to support you if your actions are the same as what you promised to the citizens,” Demirel stated

<sup>13</sup> Şemsi Denizer is the organiser of the Great Miners’ strikes held in 1990-1991 and the president of the relevant union.

<sup>14</sup> For the unionisation movement of public employees, see Doğan, 2015.

that Yılmaz was correct in his demands and that they would not give up their promises (Cumhuriyet, 09.01.1992). Demirel, far from being confrontational, was in a way signalling that he could make concessions towards organised labour with this soothing rhetoric. In addition, Demirel showed how much the government cared about the unions, against Özal's perspective of not caring about unions. In this way, Türk-İş regained its prestige and opened the doors to Ankara's lobbying.

In a report prepared by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) on Turkey during this period, it stated that the government welcomed the changes planned in the constitution and laws. In addition, the government was asked to return the assets of DİSK and its affiliated unions (Cumhuriyet, 14.01.1992). DİSK was reopened in 1991 and Kemal Nebioğlu was elected as its president during this period. Although the confederation did not have the power it had in the 1970s, it was still active in various business lines and demanded from the government that the fundamental rights of labour, such as organisation, collective bargaining, and strike, be made functional (Cumhuriyet, 25.01.1992). Similarly, Hak-İş stated that the new government increased the future expectations and hopes of the society and emphasised that the first thing should be a constitutional amendment (Cumhuriyet, 23.01.1992).

Against this background, the government's first economic package, announced by the Minister of State responsible for the economy, Tansu Çiller, did not satisfy the demands of workers. According to Türk-İş President Yılmaz, the package was just a recommendation, and low-income people could not tolerate waiting for the 6-month period that was stated to be needed to reduce inflation (Cumhuriyet, 21.01.1992). In addition, the lack of any preparations in the package regarding the exclusion of the minimum wage from tax and the inclusion of articles for the privatisation of SOEs created concern among unions that the promises made to them would not be fulfilled. In particular, the promise in the package that "If workers working in SOEs leave voluntarily and take another job in the same region, there will be a 75% reduction in income tax for 10 years" reveals that the stabilisation programmes initiated by the Motherland Party Government and centred on reform in the public sector were not abandoned.

During this period, the first event that pushed Türk-İş, DİSK and Hak-İş confederations to act together against the government was related to the legalisation of May 1 as "Labour Day". The Turkish Confederation of Employer Associations (TİSK) stated that the one-day wages of workers who did not work on May 1 would be reduced. In response, the confederations asked the government to declare May 1 as a "labour day" through joint press releases (Cumhuriyet, 01.05.1992). However, this discussion revealed an important crack in the TPP-SPP coalition. Although the bill proposal was intended to be purified from left-wing elements and legalised as "Employees and Spring Festival" instead of "Labour Day" in order to gain the consent of TPP MPs, the proposal was rejected by the joint efforts of TPP and opposition MPs. In the discussions held in the Turkish Grand National Assembly, the opposition and TPP agreed on the idea that May 1 could be celebrated as a medical day, environment day, mother's day, but it was not right to celebrate it as a national holiday by highlighting a special group. SPP MP Ercan Karakaş, who brought the proposal, stated that May 1 was declared a holiday as "Spring and Flower Day" in 1925 and was celebrated with this name until September 12, and that they only added

the word “Employees” in front of it. The answer given by TPP MP Mehmet Çebi almost reflected the Party’s corporatist perspective, which prioritises the unity of the state with all its components (TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 10.03.1993);

No one is against holding a spring festival on May 1; However, it is hideous to present this discrimination. Why? Is Eid al-Adha banned for workers, Republic Day banned, and May 19 banned?.. We all celebrate the same holiday; why isn’t another vacation on the agenda? This vacation also has a history. If we evaluate this according to its history, I do not mean that this vacation is not appropriate for this nation. But, as I said, every vacation is everyone’s holiday; It is the expression of a united society that is together in joy and sorrow. Moreover, this vacation has caused some wounds to this nation in its time; I do not see the need to open a new wound.

Perhaps the most important series of events regarding labour and where the class conflict became clear during the TPP-SPP coalition period was the process of enacting the ILO conventions. Because of the restrictions imposed on union rights after September 12, Turkey did not even comply with the agreements it signed with the ILO. The TPP, on the other hand, was giving assurance, both in the government protocol and programme and in its own special programme, that the prohibitive order of September 12 on union rights would be eliminated. However, the new draft labour law, which was only the first step taken by the government within the scope of Convention No. 158 to meet ILO standards, was harshly criticised by employers. In particular, the principles of opening a judicial remedy against unfair and arbitrary dismissal of workers, as well as reinstatement and compensation included in the draft, have prompted employers to act jointly. As a matter of fact, employer organisations such as TİSK, the Turkish Industry and Business Association (TÜSİAD), the Aegean Chamber of Industry (EBSO), the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB), the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce, and the Izmir Chamber of Commerce opposed this draft, which allowed intra-class conflicts to be put aside with similar discourse (Cumhuriyet, 14.01.1992-15.03.1992).

According to TİSK, where these discourses are jointly represented, the draft was nothing but dynamite placed at the foundations of the economy, and every means had to be tried to prevent it from becoming law. In this context, employers were first looking for ways to create a rift within the coalition so that the proposal would not be referred to parliament. TİSK President Baydur explained that he saw the draft occupational safety law as a part of the SPP, but that the draft was intended to be attributed to the government. The fact that there was no clear response from the TPP against TİSK, which based its general strategy on preventing the draft from reaching parliament by forcing the TPP, made the situation even more complicated for the government. As a matter of fact, Demirel did not answer the questions asked to him about the subject. The unions agreed that they would not hesitate to use their collective power if the proposal was blocked. Hak-İş argued that TİSK wanted to prevent the draft from becoming law by pitting coalition parties against each other. DİSK attributed the reason employers remained away from even discussing the draft to the fact that all their demands were included in the law and constitution on September 12. Türk-İş President Yılmaz, however, wanted to draw attention to the power created by the organised solidarity of labour against the intense pressure exerted by employers to prevent drafts from becoming law (Cumhuriyet, 15.03.1992-15.06.1992).

However, because TPP deputies did not participate in the ILO convention negotiations

held in the Parliament on November 19, 1992, the quorum could not be reached, and then the Minister of Labour Mehmet Moğultay left the Parliament, stating that he would resign. After these discussions, the conventions were accepted only in the Turkish Grand National Assembly on November 25, 1992, thanks to Demirel. However, ILO Convention No. 158, which brought judicial guarantees to workers against dismissals, was vetoed by President Özal and sent to the Parliament for a second discussion (Cumhuriyet, 15.06.1992-15.12.1992). Although the contract was brought back to the agenda of the parliament without any change, it could only be put into force on January 4, 1995.

All this strategic selectivity (Jessop, 2005, p.173) implemented by the Party was causing unions to intensify their criticism of the TPP on a daily basis. The project adopted by the party when it came to power gained the consent of many worker organisations, especially unions affiliated with Türk-İş. At this point, DISK stated that the time they had given to the government had expired. Hak-İş explained that they were looking at the future with despair. Türk-İş's disappointment was manifested in its new motto "Slave order, slave order, down with the Demirel order". The unions agreed that action against the government should be taken as soon as possible. As the TPP's first 500 days of power were coming to an end, the drafts enacted into law, other than the ILO Conventions, were far from erasing the traces of September 12 on the working life that the TPP had promised. No changes towards democratisation could be made in the Trade Unions Law, Collective Bargaining Agreement, Strike and Lockout laws; studies on the unionisation of civil servants remained at the draft level, and the Draft Law on Job Security could not be passed by the Council of Ministers (Cumhuriyet, 08.12.1992-24.03.1993). However, during Demirel's term as Prime Minister, the decade-long erosion in real wages was reversed. When real wages in 1985 were taken as a basis of 100 points, real wages increased to 136 in 1990, 193.9 in 1991, 199.8 in 1992, and 203.5 in 1993 (Özgün, 2014, p.100). This situation revealed that the neoliberal perspective, which sees labour as the most important element of cost and focuses on reducing wages, was not shared by the True Path Party during this period.

### **Conclusion**

The TPP was founded after the 1980 military coup and attempted to continue its political life under the authoritarian order created by the September 12 regime under the influence of strong structural changes in the global economy. The Motherland Party Government, which came to power after the transition to civilian rule, was motivated to develop and protect this neoliberal order, which was structured under the dominance of supranational financial institutions and implemented through the military regime. The most important of TPP's main tools was the suppression of labour. TPP, on the other hand, argued that 'a healthy balance of labour, capital and enterprise' should be established during this period. In this context, TPP was producing discourses aimed at gaining the support of labour against the structural conditions of the labour market in which it was born. During the opposition period, the party was opposed to the suppression of wages, which was the most important element that ensured the sustainability of the accumulation process continued by the junta and the Motherland Party Government, starting from January 24. TPP argued that there was a significant decrease in workers' wages and living standards. The Party

stated that they would not settle for development with cheap labour and promised workers that their union and collective bargaining rights would be reorganised.

TPP was, in a way, referring to the political economy of the 1960s by highlighting the large inequalities in income distribution, full employment, and the relationship between poverty and income distribution, which policymakers avoided mentioning in the neoliberal process. During the period from its establishment until it came to power, the TPP called out to workers, the oppressed of the neoliberal system deepened by the Motherland Party Government. In this context, the election manifesto titled “A New Turkey on the Morning of October 21” published by the Party in 1991 constituted the highest point of the Party’s emphasis on social welfare. However, the Party’s discourses reminded of the proverb “Only God Almighty can give without taking”, which Borotav, Yeldan, and Köse (2000, p.28) used to understand populism in Turkey. TPP was looking for ways to give without taking despite the evolving balance of power. Because ‘how the distribution demands will be met in favour of the popular classes, that is, by giving to the labour/poor without taking from the capital/rich’ remained unclear in the TPP’s discourses. The main concern was how the promises made to labour would be met in an environment in which domestic and foreign debt reached 470 trillion in the currency of the period, the treasury had a cash deficit of 72 trillion, and the budget had a cash deficit of 32 trillion. The answer to this question will be determined by social power relations and sectoral and class struggles of interest.

As a matter of fact, during its rule, the party lost the support of many worker organisations, especially unions affiliated with Türk-İş. During the first 500 days of the TPP’s rule, the drafts enacted into law, other than the ILO Conventions, were far from erasing the traces of September 12 on working life that the TPP promised. No changes towards democratisation could be made in the Trade Unions Law, Collective Bargaining Agreement, Strike and Lockout laws, studies on the unionisation of civil servants remained at the draft level and the Draft Law on Job Security could not be passed by the Council of Ministers. Issues such as wage increases below the inflation rate and the freezing of wages were on the agenda again, and neoliberal moves towards unionisation could not be prevented. This situation was an indicator of TPP’s transition to the process of integrating into neoliberal labour policies.

However, the period during which the party was in opposition was a stance against the process of oppression of labour, which started with the February 24 period, continued with military tutelage, and continued with the Özal administration. This situation presents an important originality in the struggle to build neoliberal hegemony in Turkey. The practical effects of neoliberalism have not been reflected in the same way everywhere, and in Turkey, a segment of the centre-right has had a positive impact on the mobilisation of organised labour against policies in this context. The discourses put forward by the TPP during this period continue to offer stimulating tools to guide today’s politicians in their fight against neoliberalism. This situation demonstrates that this social process cannot be fully understood without considering the unique local characteristics of each country, and this area of originality still awaits the attention of new researchers who can contribute to the intellectual, political, and administrative knowledge.

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