REFUGEE WORKERS IN LABOUR MOVEMENT: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF A UNITED STRUGGLE IN GAZIANTEP

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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- this thesis contains no material that has been submitted or accepted for a degree or diploma in any other educational institution;
- this is a true copy of the thesis approved by my advisor and thesis committee at Boğaziçi University, including final revisions required by them.

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ABSTRACT

Refugee Workers in Labour Movement:

Possibilities and Limitations of a United Struggle in Gaziantep

Capitalism has historically instrumentalised migrant labour to discipline the working class, exacerbating working conditions and fostering competition between migrant and native workers to maximize profits. This competition results in lower wages, longer working hours, and diminished political and organizational capacity for the working class. Despite these challenges, some labour organizations have succeeded in bridging these divisions, fostering solidarity between migrant and native workers. This thesis explores one such example of a united struggle of citizen and Syrian workers in Turkey. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with citizen workers, Syrian workers under TPS, trade unionists, and experts, this research investigates the unionization efforts at the AKBL slipper-shoe factory in Gaziantep, which employs approximately 550 workers. Despite facing rising anti-immigrant sentiment and violence in 2021, Syrian workers played a leading role in the process. Although the unionisation ultimately failed, the united struggle between citizen and Syrian workers reshaped workers' relations, fostering solidarity and changing attitudes. This case shows that while xenophobia is often employed as a tool to undermine efforts, solidarity rooted in labour internationalism can counter such strategies. However, such a struggle has a vulnerable ground and its sustainability depends on factors such as general economic conditions of the country, the political and organisational capacity of the working class, the migration regime in the country, political capacity of far-right politics and the prevalence of anti-immigrant sentiments.

ÖZET

İşçi Sınıfı Hareketinde Mülteci İşçiler: Gaziantep'te Birleşik Bir Mücadelenin Olanakları ve Sınırlılıkları

Kapitalizm tarihsel olarak göçmen emeğini, işçileri disipline etmek için araçsallaştırmış, çalışma koşullarını kötüleştirmiş ve karı maksimizasyonu için göçmen ve yerli işçiler arasındaki rekabeti teşvik etmiştir. Bu rekabet sonucunda, işçi sınıfının ücretleri azalmış, çalışma saatleri uzamış ve işçi sınıfının siyasal ve örgütsel kapasitesi zayıflamıştır. Buna karşın, bazı emek örgütleri bu bölünmeler arasında köprü kurmayı başarmış, işçiler arasında dayanışmayı teşvik etmiştir. Bu tez, Türkiye'deki vatandaş ve Suriyeli işçiler arasındaki bir birleşik mücadeleyi incelemektedir. Vatandaş işçiler, geçici koruma statüsü altındaki Suriyeli işçiler, sendikacılar ve uzmanlarla yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelere dayanan bu araştırma, Gaziantep'te yaklaşık 550 işçinin çalıştığı AKBL fabrikasındaki sendikalaşma sürecini incelemektedir. 2021'de yükselen göçmen karşıtlığına karşın Suriyeli işçiler bu süreçte öncü bir rol oynamıştır. Sendikalaşma nihayetinde başarısız olsa da, işçilerin birleşik mücadelesi, dayanışmayı teşvik ederek ve tutumları değiştirerek işçilerin ilişkilerini yeniden şekillendirmiştir. Bu vaka, yabancı düşmanlığının, sendikalaşmayı baltalamak için sıklıkla bir araç olarak kullanılmasına karşın, emek enternasyonalizmine dayanan dayanışmanın bu tür stratejilere karşı koyabileceğini göstermektedir. Ancak, bu birleşik mücadele kırılgan bir zemine sahiptir ve sürdürülebilirliği ülkenin genel ekonomik koşulları, işçi sınıfının siyasi ve örgütsel kapasitesi, ülkedeki göç rejimi, aşırı sağ siyasetin siyasi kapasitesi ve göçmen karşıtı duyguların yaygınlığı gibi faktörlere bağlıdır.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION 1
1.1 Theoretical framework and research objectives 1
1.2 Methodology 3
1.3 Research questions 7
CHAPTER 2: CAPITALISM, MIGRANT LABOUR AND TRADE UNIONS 10
2.1 Why does capitalism need migrant labour? 10
2.2 Trade unions and migrants 14
CHAPTER 3: MIGRANT LABOUR IN TURKEY AND THE APPROACHES OF TRADE UNIONS 23
3.1 Syrians in Turkey: From migrants to workers 23
3.2 The approach of trade unions towards migrant workers in Turkey 26
CHAPTER 4: MAPPING THE STRUGGLE FIELD: FROM CITY AND FACTORY TO WORKING CONDITIONS AND RELATIONS 30
4.1 Gaziantep: A city for migrant labour 30
4.2 An attempt to build unionisation and collective struggle: Organising the DISK-Textile Union in the AKBL factory 35
4.3 Understanding the field of struggle and the factory regime: Working conditions in the AKBL Factory 37
4.4 Relations between native and migrant workers and ethnic hierarchy 53
CHAPTER 5: PASSING THE NARROW GATE: UNIONISATION AND UNITED IN STRUGGLE 61
5.1 The Beginning of Unionisation at AKBL Factory 61
5.2 The instrumentalisation of the trade union by the workers: Dissolution of first workplace committees 64
5.3 Second phase of unionization: Building common demands 67
5.4 The rise of unionization and the resistance in front of the factory 70
5.5 Organizing in the hottest summer of migrants 79
5.6 The management of the factory is launching an offensive: Breaking the organization and end of the story 89
5.7 Loyalty to trade union until the last moment: Syrian workers under TPS in a united struggle 98
CHAPTER 6: LEGACY OF THE STRUGGLE AND TODAY'S PICTURE 103
6.1 After the unionisation experience: Struggle legacy and lessons learned 103
6.2 Where are we today? The possibility of a united struggle in Turkey 110

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION 117
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (IN ENGLISH) 120
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (IN TURKISH) 123
APPENDIX C: APPROVAL OF THE ETHICS COMMITTEE 125
REFERENCES 126

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Theoretical framework and research objectives

The capitalist mode of production has historically relied on the mechanisms of accumulation through migration, dispossession, and the exploitation of migrant labour. Migrants represent a crucial source of the relative surplus population, and thus, the initiation or creation of migration and the manufacture of migratory flows are integral to the functioning of capitalist production. Capitalism requires a surplus population that exceeds the employment opportunities available at any given time. This surplus population, a fundamental condition for the existence of capitalist production, forms a reserve army of labour—comprising unemployed and underemployed individuals—who are perpetually available for work (Marx, Capital, p. 602). Through this reserve army, capitalist relations of production can swiftly fill employment gaps during periods of economic expansion, enhance control and discipline over the working classes, and adjust working conditions—particularly wages and working hours—in accordance with the demands of capital. The reserve army of labour is less a division within the working class itself and more a strategic mechanism used by capital to regulate labour relations. To counter this strategy, it is essential for native and migrant workers to unite in struggle, rather than compete against one another. Engels, in his analysis of Irish workers in England, underscores that only through such solidarity can the working class transcend the divisive traps of competition. Trade unions play a critical role in this process by formulating common demands that address these competitive challenges (Hyman, 1971) and by fostering a collective identity and shared interests that resist division (Kelly, 2002).

In Turkey, migrant labour has been instrumentalized for depressing wages, extending working hours, and exacerbating the precariousness of labour relations, especially in the informal sectors. This dynamic has intensified since the onset of the Syrian civil war, which led to an unprecedented influx of refugees into Turkey. While the neoliberal transformation has already made the working class more precarious and unorganised on a global scale, the economic crisis in today's Turkey is experienced by the working classes as high unemployment, increasing precariousness, rising housing rents and a deepening purchasing power crisis, which creates a structural basis for the spread of anti-immigrant sentiments and hatred among the working class.

In June 2021, the DİSK Textile Union initiated a unionization campaign at one of the leading shoe and slipper manufacturers in Gaziantep, referred to as AKBL in this thesis, which employs over 550 workers. The significance of this unionization effort lies in its inclusion of Syrian workers under Temporary Protection Status (TPS) alongside citizen workers. This thesis seeks to explore whether this unique trade union experience—where Syrians are not only members but also active organizers—demonstrates the potential for citizen and Syrian workers under TPS to organize collectively. Specifically, it examines whether a united working-class struggle is feasible in a global context characterized by ethnic fragmentation and a growing xenophobia fueled by economic vulnerabilities.

This research focuses on the DİSK Textile Union’s unionization efforts at the AKBL Factory from June to September 2021, aiming to understand how the union managed to organize both citizen workers and Syrian workers under TPS within the same union, and how it facilitated the formation of common demands and collective interests in opposition to workplace management. Additionally, the study

investigates the challenges and opportunities of organizing citizen and Syrian workers under TPS together, as well as the de-unionization strategies employed by factory management to undermine the organizing process.

Finally, throughout this thesis, I have intentionally chosen to use the terms "citizen workers" and "Syrian workers under Temporary Protection Status (TPS)" rather than the more conventional labels of "local" and "migrant" workers, which are commonly employed in established academic literature to delineate these two categories of the working class. My primary reason for this choice is a fundamental opposition to characterizing Syrian workers, who have been living and working in Turkey for over a decade, as "illocal." The distinction between Syrian labourers and the broader Turkey working class is not rooted in their locality, but rather in their legal status, specifically their classification under TPS.

1.2 Methodology

This thesis utilizes a qualitative research design to investigate the dynamics of a unionization struggle in which citizen workers and Syrian workers under Temporary Protection Status (TPS) were organized together within the DİSK Textile Union. The decision to adopt a qualitative approach was driven by the need to deeply understand the lived experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of the participants involved in the unionization process, as well as the strategies employed by union leaders. As Bryman (2016) suggests, qualitative research is particularly effective in capturing the complexities of social phenomena, allowing for a rich, detailed exploration of the context-specific issues that influence unionization in a divided working class.

To collect data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four key groups: citizen workers, migrant workers, trade unionists, and experts. Semi-

structured interviews were chosen for their ability to balance the flexibility needed to explore unanticipated themes with the structure required to ensure that all relevant topics are addressed (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). This method facilitated in-depth discussions about the participants' experiences, thoughts, and feelings regarding the unionization struggle, while also ensuring that specific areas of interest—such as the challenges of organizing across ethnic lines and the role of anti-immigrant sentiment—were thoroughly explored. Within the scope of the field research, a total of six citizen workers, including one woman, two Syrian workers under TPS, three trade unionists, and one NGO expert working in the field were interviewed. The interviews were conducted between June and August 2024 at various locations convenient for the participants, including their workplaces, homes, the union office, and coffee shops. Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes, and six of the interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. These interviews were then transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a common technique in qualitative research where participants are chosen based on specific characteristics relevant to the research question (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This study sought to include a diverse range of voices from within the unionization effort, ensuring representation from both citizen and Syrian workers under TPS, as well as from union leaders who played key roles in organizing the effort.

The data collected from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and

naming themes, and producing the final report. The main themes identified included working conditions, ethnic hierarchy in the division of labour, citizen-Syrian relations in the workplace, union strategies, and the workplace management's de-unionization strategies.

Ethical considerations were of paramount importance throughout this research. Prior to each interview, participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research, their rights as participants, and how their data would be used. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used in the analysis and reporting to protect participants' identities. Additionally, the study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines provided by the Boğaziçi University Institutional Review Board in Social Sciences and Humanities (SBINAREK). While this qualitative study provides in-depth insights into the unionization process, it is not without its limitations. The findings are based on a specific case study within a particular socio-political context, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Additionally, despite efforts to include a diverse range of voices, the sample size was relatively small, a common characteristic of qualitative research, but one that nonetheless limits the breadth of perspectives captured. Future research could build on this study by including a larger sample or by conducting comparative studies across different industries or regions.

The methodological approach employed in this thesis was carefully designed to capture the nuanced experiences and perspectives of workers and union leaders involved in a complex and challenging unionization effort. By utilizing semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, this study provides a detailed exploration

of the factors influencing the ability of workers to organize across ethnic lines in a context characterized by significant social and economic challenges.

Finally, I would like to mention some of the difficulties I experienced during the research. The first time I visited Gaziantep was in April 2022, less than a year after the AKBL resistance. As a researcher focused on migration and labour, I engaged in discussions with trade unionists and some of the workers who participated in this study. My final visit, within the scope of this research, occurred in the summer of 2024. It has been two years since my initial visit to Gaziantep and nearly three years since the unionisation effort ended. Over this period, I observed that workers have difficulty recalling a struggle that was ultimately unsuccessful, and they are often reluctant to discuss it. I was able to reach all of my worker interviewees through the union, which imposes certain limitations and presents potential biases. Most of the citizen workers I connected with remained in contact with the union, in some capacity, over the past three years. As a result, these workers predominantly recalled positive aspects of the union's involvement in the process. Throughout this thesis, it may be said that one reason for the overwhelmingly positive perceptions of Ahmet, the union’s regional representative, is that I found participants through the trade union.

To elicit more candid responses about the union's strategies and tactics, I reassured the workers during the interviews by emphasising that their identities would remain confidential and frequently reiterated that I was an independent researcher, unaffiliated with the trade union. This approach was especially crucial when speaking with citizen workers. Although many of them were involved in the resistance, they often knew that hostility toward migrants was socially undesirable. In a formal interview setting, where I was recording conversations and taking

extensive notes, many struggled to openly express their opinions on migrants, fearing judgment. Consequently, I often waited until the formal interview concluded and the recording had been turned off, posing casual questions like, "How are things now? Are rents still high?" to create a more comfortable environment for them to share their views on migrants. Some workers eventually disclosed their negative opinions, though they were careful to assert that they were not anti-immigrant.

Interviewing Syrian workers under Temporary Protection Status (TPS) who had participated in the unionisation process at the AKBL Factory proved to be one of the most challenging aspects of this fieldwork. Although I was able to establish contact with seven Syrian workers under TPS, I conducted semi-structured interviews with only two. I reached out to the other Syrian workers via two interviewees who were fluent in Turkish, thus eliminating the need for a translator. However, despite this established connection, I was unable to convince the others to meet with me. One of the Syrian workers under TPS, who had been a leading figure in the unionisation effort, told me, “What’s left of the union, I’m in Qatar". Despite agreeing to an online interview, he later ignored my calls. When I asked another Syrian worker about this reluctance, he explained: "They’re scared, abi, people don’t want to deal with it."

1.3 Research questions

Within the scope of this thesis, in which I focused on the united struggle of citizen and Syrian workers, I had 4 main questions. These questions were respectively as follows: How was the ground for the united struggle of citizen and Syrian workers constructed? What does the sustainability of this struggle depend on? Has the united struggle affected workers' relations with each other? Has the united struggle affected

the factory management in terms of labour relations in the workplace and their strategy of de-unionisation? In order to find answers to these fundamental questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with citizen workers, Syrian workers under TPS, trade unionists who are the subjects of the unionisation process in the AKBL factory and experts in the field. In conducting the semi-structured interviews, I employed a set of pre-designed questions specifically tailored for the four primary groups I intended to engage with: citizen workers, Syrian workers under Temporary Protection Status (TPS), trade unionists, and subject matter experts. These questions provided a structured framework that facilitated a focused exploration of the core issues under investigation. However, as is characteristic of qualitative research methodologies, particularly semi-structured interviews, the flexibility of this approach allowed for the emergence of new, unanticipated themes during the interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The participants' responses often deviated from the initial questions, leading to the exploration of additional topics and deeper insights into areas that had not been previously considered. This iterative and responsive process is aligned with the recommendations of Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), who emphasize the importance of allowing interviews to evolve organically to capture the full complexity of the subject matter. Consequently, this approach enabled a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the issues, reflecting the dynamic nature of the participants' experiences and perspectives. All interviews were conducted in Turkish. Both Syrian workers under Temporary Protection Status (TPS) demonstrated sufficient proficiency in Turkish to participate effectively. The questionnaire, originally prepared in Turkish, was subsequently translated into English for the purposes of this thesis. The guiding questions I developed for the four

main groups can be found in the Appendix A and Appendix B at the end of the thesis.

CHAPTER 2

CAPITALISM, MIGRANT LABOUR AND TRADE UNIONS

2.1 Why does capitalism need migrant labour?

The history of capitalism is inextricably linked to the history of migrant labour. The processes of dispossession through migration and the accumulation of wealth based on the exploitation of migrant labour are fundamental to the very existence of capitalist relations of production. The demand for an intensive labour force, which emerged following the Industrial Revolution, was largely satisfied through the dispossession of rural populations and the stimulation of migration—essentially, the production of migrants. Throughout the 19th century, migrant workers, employed as cheap labour in factories, mines, and railway construction, were predominantly concentrated in the textile industry in Britain and in railway projects in the United States (Tilly, 1990).

Throughout the history of industrial capitalism, the capitalist class has systematically exploited migrant workers as a source of inexpensive labour. Additionally, migrant labour has been instrumentalized to depress general wage levels, extend working hours, weaken the capacity of the working class to mobilize—often by breaking strikes—intensify capital's control over the labour force, and ultimately, to dismantle the political and organizational unity of the working class.

One of the dominant theoretical frameworks explaining the crucial role of migrant labour in capitalism is found in Marx’s conceptualizations of the surplus population and the industrial reserve army. In the section of Capital titled "General Law of Capitalist Accumulation," Marx identifies the industrial reserve army as a

fundamental dynamic of the capitalist production process and capital accumulation. He argues that capitalist relations of production are never satisfied with mere natural population growth; rather, they require the existence of an industrial reserve army -a pool of unemployed or semi-unemployed individuals ready to work at any time (Marx, 1982: 788). This reserve army of labour allows the capitalist class to reduce wages, thereby lowering the cost of labour power, while simultaneously enhancing its ability to control and discipline workers. The presence of a readily available labour force compels employed workers to accept lower wages, longer working hours, and deteriorating working conditions (Marx, 1982: 788-794).

However, this theory, defined as a population law specific to capitalism and based on the expectation of continuous population growth, has faced various criticisms. Critics have highlighted issues such as the increasing control over women's reproductive rights, the struggle for abortion rights, and the resultant decline in population growth rates (Seccombe, 1995). These critiques argue that Marx may have viewed the increase in the working-class population as a natural-biological process rather than as a historical-social phenomenon (Ferguson & McNally, 2015). Despite these critiques, the core of Marx's theory remains pertinent: capitalism continues to generate a surplus population through various mechanisms, and in doing so, it creates displaced populations.

Migrant workers constitute a significant portion of the relative surplus population within capitalist production relations, and Marx notably refers to them as the "light infantry of capital" (Capital). Historically, this population has been instrumentalized by the capitalist class to exert control and discipline over the working class. This has been primarily achieved by lowering wages, reducing production costs, and intensifying the exploitation of surplus value. A notable

example of this dynamic can be observed in the 19th century, where Irish workers, often regarded as the most oppressed segment of the English working class, were strategically employed by the capitalist class to exacerbate working and living conditions for the broader workforce (Anderson, 2020, p. 117).

> "The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he regards himself as a member of the ruling nation and consequently he becomes a tool of the English aristocrats and capitalists against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself." (Marx, 1870)

In his seminal 1844 work on the working and living conditions of the working class in England, Friedrich Engels provides a detailed examination of the relations between English and Irish workers. Engels portrays Irish workers as living in extreme poverty, lacking proper footwear and clothing, subsisting primarily on potatoes, residing in the worst housing conditions, and spending their meager earnings on alcohol. He argues that wherever Irish workers competed with their English counterparts, they effectively lowered wages, worsened working and living conditions, and, as a result, diminished the overall level of civilization among English workers (Engels, 1844). However, Engels does not hold the Irish workers themselves responsible for these deteriorating conditions. Instead, he emphasizes the "competition" that capitalism fosters among workers, identifying it as a foundational element of capitalist society. This competition, perpetuated by the ideological apparatus of the ruling class, is, according to Marx, the key to the capitalist class's ability to maintain its dominance and control (Marx, 1870).

The competition between Irish and English workers, which led to increased exploitation and deteriorating working and living conditions for the working class, is not a phenomenon confined to 19th-century capitalism. In contemporary capitalist production relations, labour migrations have become even more central, with

dominant capitalist nations evolving into "permanent importers" of migrant labour. This dynamic continues to exacerbate competition among workers, driving down wages and eroding working conditions, much as it did in the past, but now on a global scale.

> "Today, however, the neoliberal capitalist goal is to create and sustain a temporary migrant workforce that is differentiated from the citizen workforce, whose everyday life and longer-term expectations are so degraded that they can often be viewed and treated as disposable. … The concept of disposability involves the devaluation of household labour of social reproduction as much as degradation of waged labour in the workplace, highlighting the multiple sites of capitalism's essential impulse to treat labour power as merely a commodity." (Ferguson & McNally, 2015: 15).

The period that began in the 1980s can be characterized as one in which capitalist production relations increasingly produced migrant labour populations, effectively transforming migrant workers into a 'disposable' labour force. According to Ferguson and McNally (2015), the distinguishing feature of the neoliberal era lies in the way central capitalist countries have racialized and proletarianized populations in peripheral nations, resulting in a "massive increase in the global labour reserve." With the advent of neoliberalism, the global circulation of capital intensified, making migrant labour an essential source of low-cost labour to meet the demands of the neoliberal economy. Migrant workers, predominantly employed in labour-intensive sectors characterized by low wages, long working hours, and precarious conditions, have played a crucial role in reducing production costs (Sassen, 2006, p.13). The subjugation of migrant workers—who often lack the rights associated with citizenship—within this unjust position imposed by global capitalism has also heightened competition in local labour markets, leading to a general decline in wage levels (Anderson, 2010).

The dynamics of migration and the relationship between migrants and the established order in the neoliberal period extend beyond purely economic dimensions

(Wright, 2013). Undocumented or legally restricted migrant labour, characterized by its lack of protection, has been further marginalized and disorganized during the neoliberal period. This labour force has been widely instrumentalized to weaken the organizational and political capacity of an already precarious and unorganized working class, thereby enhancing capital's control over the workforce.

2.2 Trade unions and migrants

Since the 19th century, the attitudes of trade unions towards migrant workers have varied significantly, influencing both the dynamics of the working-class movement and the social integration processes of migrants. Throughout the history of the trade union movement, some unions have recognized migrant workers as members, striving to include them in labour struggles and uniting around common demands. Conversely, other unions have excluded migrant workers, viewing them as a threat to native workers' wages, bargaining power, and solidarity, particularly when migrants were used as strikebreakers. The approach trade unions take toward migrants plays a crucial role in shaping the relationships that migrant workers establish with unions and their likelihood of becoming members (Kranendonk & De Beer, 2016, p. 850).

Several factors influence the stance of trade unions toward migrant workers. These include the ideological and political position of the unions, the structural characteristics of the unions themselves (Afonso et al., 2020, p. 532), the political and organizational strength of the unions (Krings, 2009; Marino et al., 2015, p. 11), the degree of institutionalization within the unions (Marino, 2012), and the broader economic conditions and labour market dynamics within the host country (Penninx & Roosblad, 2001). Collectively, these elements shape whether unions adopt an inclusive or exclusionary approach toward migrant labour.

Historically, trade unions' attitudes towards migrant workers have been shaped by a combination of economic, social, and political factors. In some instances, unions have excluded migrant workers based on the belief that their inclusion in the labour market would drive down wages, weaken job security, and disrupt labour solidarity (Piore, 1979), often exacerbated by prevailing racism and ethnic discrimination within society (Miles & Phizacklea, 1984).

Conversely, factors such as economic growth and stability in the receiving country (Castles & Kosack, 1973), immigration policies and legal frameworks established by the state (Sassen, 1996), and the socialist-internationalist ideologies of unions (Milkman, 2006) have supported efforts to organize or include migrant workers within a common framework of labour struggle.

One of the primary objectives of trade unions in the context of labour migration has been to prevent the deterioration of working conditions, particularly in terms of wages and working hours (Menz, 2010, p. 97). In pursuit of this goal, two main orientations have emerged: excluding migrant workers from the labour movement or organizing them alongside native workers to defend their collective rights. Boräng et al. (2020) highlight the fact that migrant workers often lack the same rights as native workers, which leads them to accept working conditions that natives might reject, thereby contributing to the overall deterioration of labour standards. As a result, they argue that achieving equality between native and migrant workers is the most effective strategy to prevent the erosion of wages and working conditions. Throughout the history of the labour and trade union movement, numerous examples illustrate this dual approach toward migrant workers—whether exclusionary or inclusive. In the following section, we will present various examples from around the world to elucidate these dynamics.

The American Federation of Labour (A.F. of L.), founded in 1886, was one of the largest labour organizations in the United States for half a century. Despite the crucial role of immigrant labour in the industrialization and economic growth of the country, the A.F. of L. systematically excluded immigrant workers, particularly those from Europe and China. This exclusion was primarily driven by the perception that immigrants, who were often willing to accept lower wages than native workers, contributed to the overall reduction of wage levels (Higham, 1955). Nevertheless, during this same period, unions with socialist and anarchist leanings made significant efforts to organize migrant workers. Migrants who were excluded and discriminated against also formed their own solidarity networks and established unions to advocate for their rights.

For instance, in response to the California Labour Union's campaign to prevent the hiring of Chinese workers and dismiss those already employed, Chinese workers organized their own networks of solidarity. They engaged in legal and political struggles against both employers and discriminatory union practices (Saxton, 1971). Moreover, more radical labour organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) adopted an inclusive approach to organizing migrant workers. The IWW aimed to unite the working class across national lines, creating a platform for collective struggle in various sectors, particularly in mining and textiles. This approach led to significant successes in organizing migrant workers and defending their rights (Dubofsky, 1969).

The IWW's emphasis on direct action and industry-based unity strengthened solidarity between immigrant and native workers. This solidarity was prominently displayed during significant strikes in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and Paterson, New Jersey. In particular, the Lawrence Textile Strike of 1912 saw the IWW effectively

organize migrant workers from diverse ethnic backgrounds, amplifying their demands (Dubofsky, 1969: 134-142). The union's multi-ethnic and multi-cultural composition facilitated the unification of workers in pursuit of common goals. The success of the IWW during this period can be attributed to its ability to bring together workers from various backgrounds for joint action, securing its unique position within the American labour movement.

The emergence of labour organizations that practiced inclusivity in organizing migrant workers was significantly influenced by the active and vital role that migrant workers played in the labour movement, particularly in the United States from the mid-19th century onwards. The Great Railroad Strike of 1877, also known as the Great Upheaval, and the Haymarket affair of 1886 are two critical historical events that underscored the influence and position of migrant workers in the U.S. labour movement. In Chicago, where immigrant workers of Irish, German, and Eastern European origin were highly concentrated, a wave of mass demonstrations and strikes began in 1886 with the demand for an eight-hour workday. Immigrant workers were at the forefront of these actions, which culminated in the Haymarket affair—a bomb attack by unidentified individuals during a mass rally, resulting in the deaths of workers and seven police officers, followed by the arrest and execution of strike leaders. The Second International later declared May 1 as International Workers' Day in commemoration of the Haymarket affair, making it a symbol of global labour organization and international solidarity (Rabinbach, 1992).

In 19th-century Britain, where immigration from Ireland was increasing, there are numerous examples of trade unions either excluding immigrant workers on the grounds that they weakened the competitiveness of native workers or, conversely, examples of Irish and English workers uniting in common struggles against

employers. For instance, while the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE), one of the leading trade unions in the UK, barred Irish workers from joining their ranks (Panayi, 1999), the 1889 London dock strike serves as one of the most significant examples of united struggle during that era. This strike saw considerable participation from Irish workers alongside those from across the UK and stands as a milestone in the British labour movement. It was crucial not only for its scale but also for leading to the formation of effective trade unions that followed (Lovell, 1969). The 1889 dock strike, which aimed to secure wage increases and improve working conditions, marked a turning point where trade unions began to include migrant workers in their struggles rather than exclude them (Holton, 1976).

Trade unions that sought to organize migrant workers on a shared platform of struggle were often influenced by socialist and anarchist ideologies, particularly up until the mid-twentieth century. Marxist thought played a significant role in shaping this common ground of struggle. Marx proposed the unity of the working class as a means to overcome the competitive traps and the instrumentalization of migrants as a source of relative surplus population by capital. Engels, in his analysis, identified competition between native and migrant workers as one of the key mechanisms through which the capitalist system oppresses workers, asserting that "the domination of the bourgeoisie is based entirely on competition between workers, that is, on the fact that workers lack unity" (Engels, 1844: 223). He called on trade unions to unite workers against the bourgeoisie's divide-and-rule tactics. The founding of the International Workingmen's Association, or First International, was a direct response to British capitalists importing foreign workers to break a construction strike, and it aimed to unite various workers' associations and trade unions to defend the working and living conditions of the working class on an international scale.

Following the Second World War, with the reconstruction of Europe and the implementation of the Marshall Plan, European economies entered a period of rapid growth, which led to an intense demand for labour. As discussed in the previous section, capitalist economies require a surplus population ready to work due to their dynamic needs. The Second World War, which resulted in the loss of tens of millions of lives and the displacement of many more, depleted not only the surplus population but also the working population itself, necessitating an increase in women's employment during this period. As previously mentioned, capitalist systems can compensate for labour shortages by creating forced displacement or encouraging migration, effectively manufacturing a surplus population. Between 1950 and 1973, more than 10 million people migrated to Europe to meet the labour demands of the post-war reconstruction effort (Castles, Booth, & Wallace, 1984). These migrant workers were primarily employed in sectors such as manufacturing, mining, construction, and services, where harsh working conditions and low wages deterred citizen workers (Toksöz, 2006: 27).

There is a significant distinction between the approach of European trade unions toward migrant workers before and after the Second World War. Trade unionism in the pre-war period, which largely focused on the rights of citizens and exhibited a predominantly exclusionary attitude toward migrants, shifted after the war to prioritize the improvement of migrants' working conditions and securing equal rights with native workers (Boräng et al., 2020). Before the war, trade unions often resisted the organization of migrant workers and their participation in the labour movement, fearing that unionizing migrants could undermine the wages and job security of native workers (Marino et al., 2017, pp. 5-6). Consequently, various European countries enacted laws that restricted the labour rights of migrants,

imposed employment quotas, and in countries like Germany and Austria, allowed migrants to be employed only in specific sectors and under conditions determined by the state (ibid., pp. 11-16).

In the post-war period, however, trade unions generally adopted a more inclusive approach toward migrant workers. Unions developed policies aimed at encouraging migrant workers to join unions and improving their working conditions and rights. In countries such as Germany and the Netherlands, trade unions played a role in organizing migrant workers within trade unions and facilitating their integration into society by offering language courses and vocational training programs. Similarly, in the UK, trade unions organized special campaigns to recruit migrant workers in the post-war period, developed policies to integrate them into society, and played a crucial role in improving their working conditions (Marino et al., 2017, pp. 10-11).

A more contemporary example of trade union responses to migration can be seen in the case of labour migration from new EU member states like Poland to older member states such as the UK and Ireland, following the expansion of the European Union between 2004 and 2007. The EU expansion presented various challenges and opportunities for trade unions concerning the mobility of both labour and capital within the EU. In response to this migration, trade unions in the UK and Ireland actively initiated efforts to organize migrant workers and protect their rights (Meardi, 2010, pp. 108-109). These unions also developed innovative strategies to facilitate the integration of migrant workers into their host countries, such as distributing informative materials specifically targeting migrant workers and collabourating with local migrant associations (ibid., pp. 109-110).

The exploration of the relationship between capitalism relations of production, migrant labour, and trade unions underscores the intricate dynamics that have shaped the working class movement over time. Historically, migrant labour has been both a tool for capital accumulation and a source of tension within the working class. The exclusionary practices of some trade unions, particularly in the pre-World War II era, reflect the broader social and economic anxieties about labour competition and job security. However, as global migration patterns intensified and labour needs evolved, especially after the Second World War, trade unions began to adopt more inclusive strategies, recognizing that the unity of native and migrant workers is essential for the advancement of labour rights.

The shift in trade union strategies from exclusion to inclusion, particularly in the post-war period, highlights the potential for collective action in overcoming the divisive tactics employed by capitalist interests. As the examples from the United States and Europe illustrate, when trade unions embraced migrant workers and fought for their rights alongside native workers, they not only strengthened the labour movement but also contributed to the broader social integration of migrant populations. The case studies discussed demonstrate that the success of such initiatives often depended on the ideological orientation of the unions and their ability to adapt to changing economic and social conditions.

In the contemporary context, where labour migration remains a significant factor in global capitalism, the lessons from historical and recent unionization efforts are more relevant than ever. The continued marginalization of migrant workers in the neoliberal era, characterized by precarious working conditions and legal vulnerabilities, calls for renewed efforts by trade unions to build inclusive movements. By doing so, unions can effectively challenge the mechanisms that

perpetuate inequality and exploitation within the labour market, fostering solidarity among all workers regardless of their origin.

CHAPTER 3

MIGRANT LABOUR IN TURKEY AND THE APPROACHES OF TRADE UNIONS

3.1 Syrians in Turkey: From migrants to workers

Given its geographical position as a bridge between Asia and Europe, Turkey has emerged as a central hub for migration, particularly from the late 20th century onwards. Among the significant migration flows directed towards Turkey are the Iranians who fled political and religious persecution following the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution, with their numbers reaching approximately 1.5 million as they sought temporary refuge in Turkey before transitioning to Europe (Kara & Korkut, 2010: 157). Additionally, Afghans, escaping war, poverty, and insecurity since the 1970s (Monsutti, 2008; McChesney, 2013), and over 300,000 Bulgarian Turks, who sought refuge in Turkey due to increasing pressure on the Turkish minority, especially in 1989 (İçduygu, 1996), have been part of this migration phenomenon. Furthermore, Iraqis the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Danış, 2006), along with migrants from the Turkic states of Central Asia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, contribute to the broader landscape of migration towards Turkey.

These migration waves have profoundly influenced various aspects of Turkish society, including social life, urban spaces, demographics, and labour markets. Except for the 1989 migration of Bulgarian Turks, most migrants in Turkey are employed in highly informal sectors such as textiles, agriculture, construction, and services, often working without legal or social protections (Chen, 2009). The integration of these large migrant groups into Turkey's labour force reflects global

patterns observed during the 1980s and 1990s. Migrant workers, who often lead precarious and vulnerable lives due to their undocumented and unregistered status, endure long working hours for low wages, and lack occupational health and safety, job security, and social protection. The labour demands of the receiving country are pivotal in shaping migration patterns (de Haas, Castles, & Miller, 2020: 275), and the subsequent labour incorporation of migrants is closely aligned with these demands, often influenced by public policies that regulate and manage these processes (Sharma, 2000: 8). In Turkey, the working and living conditions of migrants are primarily determined by the need for an informal and undocumented labour force required by sectors where informality is prevalent.

The outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 led to an unprecedented refugee crisis, with millions of Syrians seeking refuge in neighboring countries, particularly Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan (İçduygu, 2015). Turkey, which became the country with the largest number of refugees globally in 2014, has seen a dramatic increase in its Syrian population following this crisis. With the enactment of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) in the same year, Syrians who were initially considered "guests" without legal status were granted "temporary protection" status. As of 1 August 2024, according to the Ministry of Interior Directorate of Migration Management, there are 3,103,606 Syrians living under temporary protection status in Turkey (Presidency of Migration Management, 2024). The majority of the Syrian population resides in cities along the Syrian border or in major metropolitan areas in the west of the country where job opportunities are more abundant. Initially concentrated in camps in border cities, Syrians have increasingly moved into urban centers since 2014 to meet the labour demands of the Turkish

economy (Belanger & Saraçoğlu, 2020). The provinces with the highest concentration of Syrians are Istanbul, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Hatay, and Adana.

As we move beyond the 13th year of the Syrian civil war, Syrian workers have become a significant component of the Turkish working class. Employed predominantly in sectors where informal labour is pervasive, such as seasonal agriculture, manufacturing, and textiles, Syrians are subjected to working conditions characterized by low wages, long hours, and frequent wage exploitation (Çetin, 2016; Çınar, 2018: 128-134; Dedeoğlu, 2018: 50-53). The overarching factor that shapes both the working and living conditions of Syrians in Turkey is the informal nature of their employment. Presently, the application for a work permit in Turkey can only be initiated by employers, meaning that Syrian workers under temporary protection can only seek registered employment if their employer chooses to apply on their behalf (Cengiz, 2020: 271-272). Due to this employer-dependent work permit system, other procedural hurdles, and the broader relationship that Turkish capitalism has forged with migrant labour, the number of work permits issued remains significantly low relative to the working Syrian population. Consequently, many Syrians under temporary protection continue to work unregistered and undocumented. In 2023, only 239,835 foreign workers were granted work permits, with 108,520 of these permits going to Syrians. Following Syrians, workers from Russia, Iran, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Afghanistan were the next most frequent recipients of work permits. Notably, the textile and garment manufacturing sectors—areas of focus for this thesis and sectors with high levels of unregistered work—issued a total of 21,739 work permits (ÇSGB, 2023).

Research has indicated that the employment of Syrians, who are often willing to work without social security and for lower wages than native workers, in sectors

with widespread informal employment has had a detrimental effect on wages and working conditions, particularly in jobs that require low skills and education (Akgündüz, Berg & Hassink, 2015: 18; Duruel, 2017: 217). Numerous studies have demonstrated that Syrian workers are employed at lower wages than their native counterparts in sectors with high levels of informality, such as textiles, agriculture, and construction (Akpınar, 2010; Kaya & Kıraç, 2016; Lordoğlu & Aslan, 2016; Karadağ, 2021). Kaygısız (2017) also notes that while the wage gap between natives and migrants widens in low-skill sectors, this gap tends to close as the skill level required by the job increases. Furthermore, some research suggests that the presence of Syrians willing to work for lower wages in informal sectors not only negatively impacts the wages of native workers in these sectors but also has a paradoxical effect of creating new registered employment opportunities for natives. Specifically, the supply of cheap, unregistered Syrian labour has been linked to the creation of new registered jobs for native workers in formal sectors (Carpio & Wagner, 2015).

3.2. The Approach of Trade Unions Towards Migrant Workers in Turkey

The relationship between labour unions and migrant workers in Turkey remains one of the most underexplored yet critical aspects within the broader literature on labour and migration studies. This gap largely stems from the fact that Turkish labour unions have yet to develop a comprehensive understanding of migration dynamics, nor have they formulated tailored strategies to address the unique challenges and needs of migrant workers.

Trade unionism in Turkey, which operates largely within a sectoral framework due to the country's legal structure, is dominated by three major confederations: TÜRK-İŞ, DİSK, and HAK-İŞ. Founded in 1952, TÜRK-İŞ has over

1.34 million members and follows a pragmatic approach to unionism, often aligned with American models (Mahiroğulları, 2003: 11). DİSK, established in 1967 by dissident unionists from TÜRK-İŞ, has 245,676 members and adheres to class-based unionism (Mahiroğulları, 2003: 11). Meanwhile, HAK-İŞ, formed in 1972 with 845,472 members, plays an equally significant role. Despite their distinct historical and ideological trajectories, all three confederations exhibit a notable "indifference" towards migrant workers (Gökbayrak & Erdoğdu, 2010; Toksöz et al., 2012; Erdoğdu & Şenses, 2015). Since the Syrian civil war and the accompanying refugee crisis began in 2011, these unions have made only limited efforts, issuing statements on World Refugee Day or responding to anti-migrant violence, but they have not yet developed a coherent strategy for addressing migrant labour issues, despite Turkey hosting the largest refugee population globally as of 2014.

While none of these confederations have adopted overtly racist or anti-immigrant stances, occasional nativist attitudes do emerge (Erdoğdu, 2020). Their common demand is the equalization of labour rights between native and migrant workers, particularly regarding access to registered employment (Danış, 2016). However, studies suggest that isolated instances of negative attitudes among trade unionists towards migrants exist (Cengiz, 2013: 97-98), but these are far from representative of the broader labour movement. Additionally, significant obstacles—such as language barriers and a lack of familiarity with Turkey's trade union landscape—continue to hinder migrant workers from engaging with unions.

The rise of far-right politics, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with organized anti-immigrant sentiment and the worsening economic conditions of the working class, further complicates the organization of migrant workers. However, DİSK and its affiliated unions have recently begun to focus more

on migration and migrant labour, holding training sessions and panels and implementing legal support projects to educate and organize migrant workers (DİSK Tekstil, 2023).

A 2023 study based on fieldwork with Turkish trade unionists revealed that, as of early 2023, TÜRK-İŞ had approximately 100 migrant worker members, while DİSK had around 500 (Kahraman & Kahraman, 2023: 109). Given the high prevalence of informal employment among migrants, union membership often hinges on registered employment. To address this, DİSK has introduced a "de facto membership" system (Kahraman & Kahraman, 2023: 110), enabling unions to provide information and support to migrant workers even if they are not formally registered. This initiative seeks to build stronger ties between unions and the migrant workforce, potentially paving the way for more comprehensive inclusion of migrant workers in the Turkish labour movement. Despite these initiatives and efforts, they have not been sufficient to foster a joint struggle between migrant and citizen workers within DISK. With the notable exception of the Textile Union's organization in the AKBL Factory, which serves as the focus of this thesis, DİSK-affiliated unions in Turkey have not provided exemplary models of co-organization between migrant and citizen workers. It is important to emphasize that the overall experience of such co-organization efforts remains limited in Turkey. The most recognized example of a collective struggle involving Syrian workers under Temporary Protection Status (TPS) and Turkish citizens took place in the shoe-upper sector. Notably, during the strikes by shoe-upper workers in Adana in 2013 and 2017, and in Kayseri in 2019, where demands for higher wages and consistent raises were made, there was a strong emphasis on solidarity with Syrian workers. As a result of these strikes, citizens and Syrian workers under TPS established the Shoe-upper Workers' Solidarity and

Cooperation Association in Adana. Similarly, in 2019, shoe workers in Kayseri founded the Association of Shoe-upper Workers. There are, of course, not only examples of collective struggle in the shoe-upper industry. Also, contrasting dynamics have emerged in different cities within the same sector. While the shoe-upper sector in Adana and Kayseri was marked by joint struggles, in 2014 it gained attention in Izmir due to anti-immigrant protests. Workers at the Izmir Shoe-Upper Industrial Site went on strike, demanding wage increases and chanting slogans such as "we don't want Syrian workers," arguing that the presence of Syrians was driving down wages and contributing to unemployment.

CHAPTER 4

MAPPING THE STRUGGLE FIELD: FROM CITY AND FACTORY TO WORKING CONDITIONS AND RELATIONS

4.1 Gaziantep: A city for migrant labour

Situated in southeastern Turkey along the Syrian border, Gaziantep serves as one of the nation's key economic hubs, strategically positioned at the crossroads of major trade routes, bolstering its trade and industrial activities (Bademli, 1977). The city, with its rich cultural heritage and historical significance, has been renowned since the Ottoman Empire for its expertise in carpet and rug weaving, copper processing, and the spice trade. In 1968, Gaziantep was designated as a priority city for development, a strategic move aimed at mitigating regional economic disparities within Turkey. The 1970s witnessed a significant rise in the number of large enterprises, particularly within the weaving and garment sectors (Başak and Saracoğlu, 2011: 426). This growth played a pivotal role in Turkey's neoliberal transformation and industrialization process, which gained momentum in the 1980s (Köse & Öncü, 1998: 144). Consequently, Gaziantep rapidly developed, emerging as a prominent production center, particularly in textiles, thereby becoming one of the 'new industrial clusters' (Eraydın, 1999). These New Industrial Clusters, as Eraydın notes, are defined by sectoral specialization (Beccatini, 1989), quality-based competition (Pyke and Senberger, 1991), and the prevalence of intensive subcontracting relationships as the primary characteristics of production (Eraydın, 2002). The economic advancement of these cities, often referred to as Anatolian Tigers in Turkish academic discourse, is marked by a duality rooted in low wages and low productivity (Filiztekin & Tunalı, 1999).

Gaziantep's economic expansion in the 1980s led to a significant labour shortage, which was addressed through migration from rural areas of Gaziantep and surrounding provinces. A quantitative survey conducted in 2009, just before the onset of the Syrian civil war, within the scope of the 'Economic and Social Integration Project in Cities Receiving Migration'—which included 1,500 households across 75 neighbourhoods in Gaziantep—revealed that the city received the majority of its migrants from nearby provinces such as Şanlıurfa, Kahramanmaraş, Adıyaman, and Kilis (Geniş, 2011: 339). Economic motivations were the primary driver for migration, with 69.5% of respondents citing economic reasons for relocating to Gaziantep (ibid. 340).

It is important to underscore the element of ‘necessity’ in these migration patterns. Between 1985 and 1995, intensified conflicts and village evacuations in the region led to the displacement of the Kurdish population, who subsequently migrated to major metropolises and regional centres, becoming part of the labour force under precarious conditions (Koç, 2015). Gaziantep emerged as a key destination for this displaced Kurdish population, who became labourers in informal sectors such as textiles and seasonal agriculture (Uçar, 2020: 42). The capitalist class in Gaziantep utilized this labour force within a framework of cheap, precarious, and uninsured working conditions. In the 1990s, the Ünaldı region—known as the heart of informal labour and the weaving sector, consisting of small workshops and enterprises—became a central area where Kurdish migrants, particularly from Suruç, became workers. These workers competed with earlier migrants and were instrumentalized in the deterioration of working conditions, particularly in terms of wages.

In response to the intra-working class divisions orchestrated by Gaziantep’s capitalist class through labour migration, which aimed to regulate working conditions

in its favor, the working class in Gaziantep, comprising both citizen and Syrians workers under TPS, engaged in various struggles in 1992 and 1993, centred on Ünaldı. These struggles demanded wage increases and insurance coverage. Drawing on the legacy and experience of these years, a month-long strike was organized in 1996, with the participation of more than 20,000 workers across 540 workplaces. The Ünaldı resistance, which still holds a significant place in the history of labour struggles in Gaziantep due to its scale and impact, resulted in workers in Ünaldı—the epicentre of informal work—securing the right to work with insurance, alongside wage increases and various social rights (Karadaş, 2014).

However, it is crucial to note that these hard-won gains were gradually eroded, particularly in the aftermath of the 2001 economic crisis. The model of low wages, low productivity, and export-oriented growth rendered local economies more vulnerable to crises, with informalization being employed as a key strategy by local capital to counteract the effects of the crisis (Yalman & Bedirhanoğlu, 2011: 257). The labour force in Ünaldı, still recognized as the hub of the garment sector and informal work, underwent a rapid transformation with the arrival of Syrians in the city after 2011. Informality acted as a magnet, drawing in Syrian workers in much the same way that it had previously attracted other migrant populations. Today, it is estimated that the majority of the workforce in the Ünaldı area, which encompasses several neighborhoods and employs more than 20,000 workers, consists of Syrian workers under temporary protection status. As of 2024, the Ünaldı neighborhood alone is home to 4,000 registered Syrians and 2,544 Turkish citizens, resulting in a Syrian population density of 157.2% (Türkoğlu, 2024: 443).

The narrative of migration to Gaziantep, which began with the influx of workers from the surrounding provinces in the 1970s and continued with the

migration of Kurdish workers in the 1990s, persists with the arrival of 'new' migrants following the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011. The capitalist class in Turkey found in the Syrian refugees the labour force it required, and Gaziantep became one of the primary destinations for Syrians fleeing the war. This migration was driven not only by Gaziantep's geographical proximity to the Syrian border and the expectation that the conflict would be short-lived but also by the prevalence of informal sectors in the city, which have long been a magnet for migrant labour.

As of July 2024, 430,113 Syrians under temporary protection status reside in Gaziantep, making it the second city in Turkey with the highest number of Syrians. Gaziantep also has the highest ratio of registered Syrians to the total population within its province, at 16.58% (Presidency of Migration Management, 2024). Data from the beginning of 2020 revealed that approximately 305,000 of the 454,002 Syrians living in Gaziantep at that time were originally from Aleppo, with Idlib being the next largest city of origin, contributing 15,921 individuals (ICMPD, 2020: 37). The majority of the Syrian population in Gaziantep is employed in unregistered and undocumented sectors, particularly in manufacturing, construction, and seasonal agriculture—industries where informality is pervasive. However, Syrians are not only present in the workforce; according to 2024 data, there are 6,300 Syrian-owned enterprises registered in Gaziantep, which employ both Syrians under temporary protection and Turkish citizens (GCC, 2024).

As discussed in the previous section, the impact of the Syrian refugee population on the Turkish economy and labour market cannot be simply categorized as 'positive' or 'negative.' To avoid reductionism, it is necessary to draw sectoral, regional, and even temporal inferences from as narrow a context as possible. For example, while the widespread belief that Syrians 'increase unemployment' is not

supported by empirical studies, these studies do suggest that the claim that 'Syrians lower wages' may hold true in sectors where informality is prevalent (Akgündüz, Berg & Hassink, 2015: 18; Duruel, 2017: 217). Conversely, it has been argued that the influx of Syrian workers has spurred growth in formal sectors by increasing production, thereby allowing 3 local workers to find formal employment for every 10 Syrians working informally (Carpio & Wagner, 2015).

The integration of Syrians into the labour market in Gaziantep reflects the broader neoliberal character of Turkey's immigration regime. This neoliberal framework has resulted in a proletarianisation process for Syrians characterized by low wages, long working hours, precarious working conditions, and a lack of social protection due to the prevalence of unregistered work. The unregistered status of Syrian workers also allows employers to bypass the legal requirements for occupational health and safety, further reducing operational costs. This systemic neglect has dire consequences, as evidenced by the 2023 data from the Health and Safety Labour Watch-Turkey (HSLW-Turkey), which reports that 51 migrant workers, 50 of whom were Syrians, have lost their lives in occupational homicides in Gaziantep over the past decade. These figures highlight that migrant workers are twice as likely as citizen workers to be victims of labour-related homicides. Moreover, the data underscores the alarming rate of worker fatalities in the textile sector within the Organised Industrial Zones in Başpınar, where the field research for this thesis was conducted. The rate of worker deaths in this sector stands at 12%, more than four times higher than the national average in Turkey (HSLW-Turkey, 2023). This disparity reflects the heightened vulnerability of migrant workers within the neoliberal economic structure, where the drive for cost minimization and profit maximization often comes at the expense of workers' lives and safety. The

exploitation of Syrian labour under these conditions is emblematic of the broader challenges faced by migrant workers in precarious, unregulated employment situations.

4.2 An attempt to build unionisation and collective struggle: Organising the DISK-Textile Union in the AKBL factory

Located in Gaziantep's Organised Industrial Zone No. 2, the company referred to as AKBL in this thesis is one of the largest contract manufacturers in its field. Engaged in the leather trade since the early 19th century, AKBL has been producing shoes and slippers in Gaziantep since 1978, serving both the Turkish market and exporting to over 18 countries. Much like Gaziantep itself, which has evolved from a local economy to one of Turkey's "new industrial clusters" with a global export focus (Eraydın, 2002), AKBL has transformed from a local manufacturer into a prominent player in the city's industrial landscape. In the early 2000s, AKBL further expanded its operations by establishing a subsidiary, AKBL Tekstil, to produce yarn for the carpet and rug industry, achieving a total revenue of 25 million USD in 2019.

AKBL gained significant public attention, and became the focus of this research, in August 2021 due to the resistance of two workers—one Turkish and one Syrian—who protested together after being dismissed from their jobs. In the early summer of 2021, in response to unionisation efforts by the DİSK-Tekstil Trade Union, which is affiliated with DİSK, the employer sought to halt the organisation through individual dismissals. This led to the dismissal of Hakan, a Turkish worker with a decade of service at the factory, followed by the dismissal of Mehmet, a Syrian worker under Temporary Protection Status (TPS). Together, they began a

joint resistance in front of the factory, demanding to be reinstated, under the slogan, "We want our jobs back."

This protest, involving both a citizen and a migrant worker, garnered national media attention, particularly as it coincided with a period of rising anti-immigrant sentiment in Turkey. This was exemplified by mass anti-migrant attacks in the Altındağ district of Ankara, where a significant number of Syrian refugees resided (BBC News Turkish, 2023). Interestingly, this period also saw the emergence of the far-right Victory Party, whose political platform was heavily focused on the repatriation of migrants, particularly Syrians, and who warned of what they described as a "silent invasion" by migrants (Koca & Saç, 2024: 339; Elçi, 2022).

As outlined above, August 2021, which marked the tenth year of the Syrian migrant presence in Turkey, was a month of significant developments. On one hand, there were violent collective actions against migrant communities, and on the other hand, anti-immigrant sentiment led to the formation of far-right political entities. Furthermore, migrants were consistently ranked as Turkey's second most pressing "problem" in various public opinion surveys (Aydın et al., 2022: 30A). Within this context, the unionisation efforts at the AKBL Factory, initiated by the DİSK-Tekstil Union and involving both citizen and Syrians workers under TPS in Gaziantep—the city with the highest concentration of Syrians—transcended the local scope of the factory. The movement, with its symbolic significance, became a national issue, highlighting the broader socio-political tensions and challenges in Turkey during that period.

In June 2021, workers at the AKBL factory in the Başpınar region, an area notorious for its harsh working conditions and repressive factory regime, initiated efforts to unionise by approaching the DİSK-Tekstil Union. This unionisation

campaign, which persisted throughout the summer, was marked by a series of challenges including worker dismissals, detentions, and protests in front of the factory. The movement occasionally gained national media attention, yet ultimately ended in failure by the close of the summer. According to Turkey's Law on Trade Unions and Collective Bargaining, a union must secure membership from at least 50% of the total workforce in a specific workplace, and 40% of the total workforce across an enterprise, in order to legally engage in collective bargaining with an employer. The DİSK-Tekstil Union succeeded in recruiting over 180 members from the AKBL factory, where approximately 550 registered workers were employed, including 25 Syrian workers under Temporary Protection Status (TPS). However, the union was unable to meet the legal threshold required to formalise its position. This shortfall, compounded by the union's inability to effectively counter the employer's anti-union strategies, ultimately led to the cessation of the unionisation efforts. This thesis will critically examine the entire process of unionisation at the AKBL factory, with a particular focus on the co-organisation of Syrian and Turkish workers. It will explore the strategies employed by both the factory management and the union, analyse whether the unionisation efforts influenced the perceptions of Turkish workers towards their Syrian counterparts, assess how the union addressed the issue of migration, and evaluate the broader possibilities for joint struggle between citizen and Syrian workers under TPS within this context.

4.3 Understanding the field of struggle and the factory regime: Working conditions in the AKBL Factory

When the DİSK-Tekstil Trade Union, affiliated with DİSK, initiated the organisation process at the factory, approximately 550 workers were employed, 25 of whom were

Syrian refugees under Temporary Protection Status (TPS) who held work permits and were registered as workers. The factory also employs more than 50 women workers, almost all of them citizens. Since the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the majority of the Syrian population in Turkey, like other migrant groups, have predominantly worked in unregistered or undocumented positions, a trend deeply rooted in the relationship that Turkish capitalism has established with migrant labour. In 2023, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security (ÇSGB) reported that a total of 239,835 foreign workers were granted work permits, of which 108,520 were Syrians. However, it remains uncommon for Syrian refugees to be employed as registered workers within the shoe-slipper manufacturing sector, where informality is notably prevalent. Indeed, the doubling of Turkey's shoe exports in the decade following 2011 was largely predicated on the exploitation of unregistered and undocumented Syrian migrant labour, a development that coincided with a decline in the domestic workforce within the sector (Bayrakcı & Altun, 2023).

The registered employment of migrants, who are often preferred due to their status as unregistered workers, represents an exceptional case within the shoe-slipper manufacturing sector. Nonetheless, even in this context, there exists a mechanism that reduces costs and incentivizes employers to engage registered labour. When asked about the registered employment of Syrians, our interviewee, a unionist who serves as the Southeast Regional Representative of the trade union and will be referred to as Ahmet throughout this thesis, provided insight into the situation. He remarked, "Until three years ago, the number of registered Syrian workers in this organization would not reach 100," and elaborated:

> "In smaller factories, in small workplaces where 100-150 people work, there are many Syrian workers employed without insurance. However, in certain large factories, it is not feasible to employ Syrian workers without insurance, so citizen workers are typically hired. There are very few registered Syrian

> workers. Under certain incentives, skilled Syrian workers were employed with work permits and insurance, and the number of these workers hovered around 100 until a few years ago. But recently, some employment projects supported by the European Union have been implemented for refugee workers. These projects covered expenses such as insurance under incentives and promoted the registered employment of refugee workers. Some factories hired Syrian workers specifically to benefit from these incentives. As a result, perhaps the number has exceeded a thousand in the last two years, but I still estimate that it remains very low. In total, 220,000 to 230,000 workers are employed in the Organised Industrial Zone. The number of insured and registered Syrian workers is at most one thousand." (Ahmet, Regional Representative of the Trade Union, Male).

We lack precise details on the specific incentives used by the AKBL factory to employ registered Syrian workers. However, it is evident that in Turkey, various programs aimed at integrating Syrians into the labour market are implemented by public institutions, ministries, and non-governmental organizations, particularly through collaborations with international institutions. The AKP government has played an active role in facilitating the formal integration of Syrians into the labour market, primarily through incentives offered by İŞKUR, which include vocational training and courses (Gezici & Karabulut, 2023). One such incentive is the 'Employment Mobilisation' initiative that began in 2017, targeting young unemployed individuals and Syrians under temporary protection (Çoban, 2018: 197).

A notable example of these efforts is the 'Employment Support for Syrians under Temporary Protection and Turkish Citizens' project, launched in 2019 in collaboration with İŞKUR, the Ministry of Family and Social Services, and supported by the World Bank. Under this project, companies are encouraged to hire workers classified as 'trainees,' with the expectation that half of these trainees will be Syrians under temporary protection and the other half Turkish citizens. İŞKUR covers the wages of these trainee workers for three months, after which employers are expected to retain at least 20% of the trainees as permanent employees (İzmir Chamber of Commerce, 2024).

Another significant program is the KİGEP - Transition to Registered Employment Programme, initiated in 2020. This program is a collabourative effort involving the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Social Security Institution (SGK), and the Ministry of Labour and Social Security's General Directorate of International Labour Force (UİGM), and is financed by the Federal Republic of Germany through the KfW Development Bank. KİGEP is also partially supported by the 'Decent Work Opportunities for Refugees and Host Communities in Turkey Project,' funded by the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (USBRM). Employers participating in KİGEP can receive six months of support payments for each Syrian worker they employ, as well as for one Turkish worker they hire or already employ. Additionally, the program covers 1500 TL of the work permit costs required for Syrians. KİGEP allows a maximum of five Syrians and five Turkish citizens per employer, aiming to encourage the registered employment of Syrians in mostly unregistered and small-scale workplaces (International Labour Organisation, 2023)

We should emphasize the significant role of indirect interventions funded by international institutions in the formal employment of Syrian workers at the AKBL firm. These interventions have been crucial not only in shaping labour market dynamics but also in influencing trade unions' approaches to the migrant crisis and the organization of migrant workers in Turkey. One of the pivotal factors that led DİSK Tekstil Union to initiate the unionization of Syrian workers at AKBL was the collaboration between 3F - The United Federation of Danish Workers and DİSK Tekstil. This project focused on training Syrian workers to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to unionize and to address the legal challenges they face in Turkey's labour market. It also provided legal support to workers, particularly

those in Istanbul and Gaziantep. The project, titled "Improving the Rights of Textile Workers, including Syrian Migrants, in Turkey," resumed in April 2023, with funding from the European Union and cooperation with DİSK Tekstil and 3F. The project's goals included translating and producing written materials, disseminating information through the media, organizing meetings and workshops to highlight migrant worker issues, and formulating policy recommendations to help migrant textile workers understand their rights and relevant Turkish laws (DİSK Tekstil, 2023).

Furthermore, during our inquiry into the working conditions at the AKBL factory, it became apparent that informal manufacturing practices were prevalent. Workers in these informal sections were employed without registration, and this part of the factory was physically segregated from the main production areas. There was also a notable difference in the entry and exit times for these unregistered workers, effectively preventing them from interacting with their registered counterparts both during and after the production process. Union Expert Yusuf highlighted this segregation, stating,

> "There were other workers working inside, both Syrian and citizen. They were contracted workers. They were a little more detached from the inside. They were unregistered. They had no relationship with registered workers. Even the entry to work and exit would be five or ten minutes different. They didn't come side by side much." (Yusuf, Union Expert, Male)

Similarly, Mehmet, a Syrian worker under TPS, noted,

> "There were more than 20 Syrians working in the factory with insurance, but there were other Syrians working on contract work, they were illegal. We could not see each other with the contract workers; the areas were different." (Mehmet, 25, Syrian worker under TPS, Male)

Within the scope of this thesis, I was unable to interview any workers from the spatially segregated and unregistered manufacturing section of the AKBL factory.

Moreover, neither the trade unionists involved in the organizing process nor the workplace committee developed a strategy to engage with this informal section, nor did they attempt to establish contact with the workers employed there. In Turkey's manufacturing industry, one of the sectors where informal work is most prevalent is sector number 5, which encompasses Weaving, Garment, and Leather—sectors where the DİSK Textile Union is established. It is estimated that informality in this sector reaches approximately 80% (Lortoğlu & Kurtulmuş, 2020: 130). Despite the high levels of unregistered work, the unions operating in this sector have not adequately addressed the challenges posed by informality, with the exception of the "de facto membership" system implemented by DİSK for Syrian workers under temporary protection (Kahraman & Kahraman, 2023: 110). This lack of strategy in addressing informal labour represents a significant weakness for these unions. Failing to organize a unified movement against capital's tactic of creating divisions within the working class not only undermines current organizing efforts but also weakens the overall organizational and political capacity of the working class. The inability to incorporate workers from the unregistered section into the unionization struggle in the formal section of the AKBL factory risks transforming the informal section into a "reserve army" for employers, thereby undermining unionization efforts.

While the AKBL factory shares similarities with other companies in the Organised Industrial Zone in terms of working hours and wages, it stands out due to its particularly oppressive factory regime, which exerts intense pressure on workers. The factory operates in two shifts—day and night—with workers on the day shift working 10 hours and those on the night shift working 8 hours. The factory does not operate on Sundays, but workers on the night shift also work 8 hours on Saturdays.

Despite paying workers the minimum wage, the AKBL factory has garnered a bad reputation in the Başpınar region for its harsh working conditions and its failure to provide compensation after dismissals.

Barış, a citizen worker who has worked at the AKBL factory for eight years in the fitting and packaging departments, noted a significant change in the wage structure over time. He observed that while there was once a wage gap between more experienced workers and newer employees, this gap gradually closed, especially with the arrival of Syrian workers:

> "There used to be a gap between wages. Those who worked for many years used to get more. But over time, with the arrival of Syrians, everyone started to equalise. But we are equalised in the minimum wage." (Barış, 43, Citizen Worker, Male)

As part of the field research for this thesis, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with six citizen workers employed at the AKBL factory. These individuals, referred to as Barış, Engin, Hakan, Kemal, Turgut, and Ece throughout this thesis, provided critical insights into the dynamics of the workplace and the impact of Syrian workers under TPS on labour conditions. All six interviewees are also union members, and their perspectives suggest a common narrative among citizen workers that parallels the views expressed by Barış. Specifically, these workers generally perceive a connection between the decline in wages and the increasing presence of Syrian workers under TPS in the factory and the country as a whole.

Barış's observation that wage differentials within the factory have narrowed over time is not unique to his workplace or sector. This phenomenon reflects a broader trend across Turkey, where average and median wages have been converging toward the minimum wage over the past two decades. Since 2000, the median wage in Turkey has gradually approached the minimum wage, resulting in a growing

proportion of workers earning minimum wage. In 2000, the median wage was 2.17 times the minimum wage, but by 2020, it had decreased to only 1.45 times the minimum wage, leading to what scholars have termed the "minimum wage-ization" of the Turkish labour market, where the minimum wage increasingly becomes the prevailing wage for employees (Yılmaz & Karataş, 2023: 173).

In the AKBL factory, there are no significant wage disparities based on ethnicity. Both Syrian and citizen workers earn wages only slightly above the minimum wage, with differences amounting to a few hundred liras. Despite this, many citizen workers believe that the influx of Syrian workers has weakened their bargaining power. In addition to concerns over wage suppression, the rising cost of housing—a factor often associated with the presence of migrants and a significant driver of anti-immigrant sentiment in public opinion (Sönmez & Adıgüzel, 2017: 805)—is another issue that citizen workers frequently attribute to the Syrian population. Turgut, one of the interviewees, articulates this sentiment:

> "They came from the war, I don't say anything about that, but there would be more work here without them. Bosses employ Syrians cheaply. The blame lies both with the boss and the state. Syrians cannot live if they don't work, they have to work, but our citizens are disgraced. Instead of employing one citizen, they employ two Syrians. Try to find a house here now, you can't. Rents start at 17,000 liras, 20,000 liras for decent houses. What will the minimum wage earners do? I am not hostile to Syrians. I just want them to go home as soon as possible. If they were gone, there would be a need for labour here, the prices of houses would fall. Everything has gotten worse in the last 3 years. Life here has become difficult. Otherwise, I have nothing against Syrians." (Turgut, 38, Citizen Worker, Male)

This statement encapsulates a broader frustration felt by many citizen workers, who perceive the presence of Syrian workers as contributing to their own economic hardships, despite not harboring personal animosity toward the migrants themselves.

The perception of wage injustice among workers, both citizen and migrant, at the AKBL factory is a significant issue that directly influences their motivation to

join the union. Our interviews reveal that regardless of their seniority or the specific tasks they perform, workers receive very similar wages, which they perceive as inherently unfair. This perceived injustice, particularly regarding pay, was frequently cited by our interviewees as one of the primary reasons for seeking union membership. As Waddington (2003) notes, one of the central motivations for workers to join unions is to protect themselves against the injustices perpetrated by employers. Furthermore, when a union fails to address or rectify these injustices, or when workers lose faith in the union's ability to advocate on their behalf, their commitment to the union tends to diminish (Moore, 2004: 8). Salih, a Syrian worker who has been employed at the AKBL factory since March 2016 and whose family has been involved in shoemaking for three generations, illustrates this sense of injustice in his own experience:

> "I worked there until the earthquake. After the earthquake, they paid us 8,500 liras. I told the manager, 'I have been working here for 7 years. I cut a thousand pairs of trainers for you daily. Are you paying me the same money as the man who enters the door right now?' He said, 'There is nothing to do, let's get back to our senses, we will talk again after the earthquake agenda passes.' April came, he gave me a 300 lira raise. What is 300 liras, it is not even bagel money. I said I would not work for this money and quit. They did not pay my wages for 14 days. I will get my rights in the hereafter." (Salih, 46, Syrian Labourer, Male)

The AKBL factory, in addition to being a place where workers were "equalized" at the minimum wage, was notorious for its oppressive factory regime and inadequate occupational health and safety measures. Yusuf, an expert with the DİSK Textile Union, highlighted these harsh conditions in our interview:

> "Working conditions were bad. There were such examples: Workers were only entitled to one glass of water during meals, you know the small 250 ml glasses of water, they could only drink one of them. They could not ask for a second glass of water. They were told that their daily due is over. The pressure was too much. It was the same for both Syrian and citizen workers. There were around 500-550 registered workers, but there was a constant circulation. Because of the working conditions, there was constant coming

> and going. It was a factory that was constantly looking for workers." (Yusuf, Trade Union Expert, Male)

Ahmet, the regional representative of the union, further elabourated on the factory's poor reputation regarding working conditions:

> "The working conditions in this factory are harsh, the minimum wage, the old workers have at most been working for 5-10 years, and most of them somehow manage to save the compensation and get themselves fired." (Ahmet, Regional Representative of the Trade Union, Male)

These testimonies underscore the severe working conditions at the AKBL factory, which, combined with the perceived wage injustices, contributed to a high turnover rate and widespread dissatisfaction among both Syrian and citizen workers. This environment not only fostered a desire for unionization but also highlighted the critical challenges faced by the union in addressing the deep-seated issues within the factory.

The high labour turnover rate at the AKBL factory, as highlighted by trade unionists, is further corroborated by our interviews with workers. The factors contributing to this high turnover, or labour mobility (Gustafson, 2002), include low wages, harsh working conditions, an oppressive factory environment, and inadequate occupational health and safety measures. Labour turnover, characterized by the voluntary or involuntary departure of workers and their subsequent replacement, often poses challenges to enterprises and the national economy. These challenges include production losses and the costs associated with training new employees (Woods and Macaulay, 1989: 80). However, this assessment loses relevance within the broader political-historical context of neoliberalism, which, since the 1980s, has expanded the global reserve labour army, undermined job security through labour law reforms, eroded social protections, and ultimately sought to transform the

working class into a disposable, cost-effective commodity (Ferguson & McNally, 2015).

In the case of the AKBL factory, it appears that management is relatively unconcerned about high labour turnover. This indifference can be attributed to several factors: the low skill and experience requirements for contract shoe-slipper manufacturing jobs, the relative ease of training new workers, and the availability of both migrant and citizen unemployed individuals in the Gaziantep region who are willing to take on these roles. The management's lack of concern is further evidenced by the dismissive attitude of "if you don't like it, don't work," which was reported not only during the unionization process but also during routine operations when workers raised minor complaints. The workers we interviewed expressed a dual awareness: on one hand, they felt they could not continue working under such conditions, and on the other, they recognized that the employer could easily replace them, highlighting their precarious position in the labour market.

Furthermore, the AKBL factory has developed a reputation in the Başpınar region for its reluctance to pay severance compensation, a concern echoed by the workers and trade unionists we interviewed. Engin, a citizen worker at the AKBL factory who started working there in 2013 and entered through his uncle's son Hakan (one of the pioneers of the resistance and organization), mentioned that while the factory initially offered wages higher than the minimum wage, over time the rate of wage increases diminished, eventually aligning with the minimum wage. Engin also commented on the factory's reputation for not paying compensation, acknowledging that while it is a legitimate concern, it is sometimes exaggerated by other workers. He noted:

> "Yes, they don't give compensation when they have difficulties. After all, they are rich and have power. Somehow they are vindicated in court. You

> can't bear it financially anyway. When there is a legal dispute, the factory somehow wins."(Engin, 30, Citizen Worker, Male)

This statement underscores the power dynamics at play, where the financial and legal resources of the employer often tilt the scales of justice in their favor, leaving workers feeling vulnerable and disadvantaged.

The working conditions at the AKBL factory are marked by an atmosphere of oppressive control and coercion, particularly within the production area where temperatures can exceed forty degrees Celsius due to the machinery. Workers are subjected to intense pressure to meet production deadlines and maintain high speeds, creating a highly stressful environment. One of the most egregious aspects of this oppressive regime is the prohibition against wearing slippers, even though the factory is one of the largest slipper manufacturers in the country. Despite the extreme heat, workers are forbidden from wearing slippers, even in areas where there is no risk of injury from falling objects. This policy, mentioned by almost all interviewees, highlights the disconnect between the factory's management and the realities of the working conditions.

Ece, a 30-year-old female worker and one of the few women interviewed for this study, provided a poignant account of the personal toll this policy took on her:

> "You stand on your feet for hours, my nail was getting ingrown in the shoe. I got a wound, it got infected. I asked for permission many times, I showed them, let me wear slippers. I also had calluses on my left foot. They wouldn't let me. As if they would die if they did. I had to go to the doctor and get a report, and when the doctor gave me a report saying ‘this woman cannot wear shoes,’ I was able to wear slippers for 2 months. Of course, it was forbidden for everyone else." (Ece, 30, Citizen Worker, Female)

The slipper ban serves as a symbolic representation of the broader oppressive working conditions within the factory. However, the control exerted over workers extends beyond the production floor and permeates every aspect of their workday,

including break periods, which are meant to provide workers with a brief respite to rest and recover. Even during these breaks, workers are subjected to strict supervision and time constraints. Security supervisors monitor the entrances, ensuring that the 30-minute break period is followed down to the last minute. Any delay results in workers being reported and having their overtime wages deducted. The end of breaks is announced through loud shouts or the ringing of a bell, further contributing to the atmosphere of surveillance and control.

Barış, a 44-year-old male worker, and Ece, both pioneers in the unionization process, described the oppressive nature of these break periods:

> "Everything from food to toilets is timed. You know, like in the military, when there are 6-7 minutes left, the bell rings and they start shouting ‘your time is running out, go inside.’ You already have 30 minutes. Should I eat, or go to the toilet, or drink tea and smoke cigarettes? 6-7 minutes left, they shout ‘go inside.’ Work is already stressful. You take a break, they don't leave you alone there either." (Barış, 44, Citizen Worker, Male)

> "They won't leave you alone even during a break. We had a 10-minute smoke and toilet break once before lunch and once after lunch. 10 minutes only. We couldn't drink tea, there was no tea. It's human nature, you're a few minutes late for a 10-minute break. We are women, after all, we have special days, I apologize. Even for this, they were keeping a report. I have 15 reports, but there was nothing noteworthy. I don't have any work-related reports, no one can say anything. Always for such trivial reasons. ‘Why did you stay so long in the washroom,’ ‘why did you stay so long smoking,’ they kept a lot of reports." (Ece, 30, Citizen Worker, Female)

These accounts illustrate how the oppressive environment at the AKBL factory extends beyond mere production quotas and deadlines, affecting the very dignity and well-being of the workers. The factory's management employs a regime of strict surveillance and control, ensuring that workers are constantly aware of their precarious position and the potential consequences of any minor infraction.

Hodson (2001) posits that worker solidarity tends to be high in environments characterized by either minimal or excessive pressure, while moderate levels of pressure tend to erode solidarity among workers. In the case of the AKBL factory,

the already high level of solidarity among workers, cultivated by the oppressive working conditions, reached its peak during the unionization process when workplace management responded to the growing movement by dismissing workers. As the next chapter will demonstrate, the increasing number of union members, bolstered by strong worker solidarity, forced the management to alter its strategy. Consequently, the factory environment was temporarily softened through the introduction of various permissions and concessions as a means to quell the burgeoning collective action.

The final issue to be addressed in this section regarding the working conditions at the AKBL factory is the glaring inadequacy of occupational health and safety measures. Shoe manufacturing is inherently hazardous, posing significant risks to worker health and safety, including fatal accidents, injuries, and occupational diseases. Gökkaya Akyol's expert thesis, “Determination of Occupational Health and Safety Risks in Shoe Manufacturing Workplaces and Determination of Chemical Exposure” (2016), identifies numerous risks inherent in the sector. These include hearing loss due to the noise of the machinery, tissue damage from operating vibrating machines, injuries from moving and cutting tools, musculoskeletal disorders from non-ergonomic workstations, and the ever-present dangers of fire and explosions. A particularly insidious hazard arises from the use of chemicals such as benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene, xylene, n-Hexane, acetone, methyl ethyl ketone, and ethyl acetate, which are common in the production process. These substances, if improperly managed, pose severe health risks, particularly respiratory diseases, to the workers exposed to them (Gökkaya Akyol, 2016: 18-28).

The AKBL factory is perceived by its workers as an unsafe environment, particularly due to inadequate ventilation, poor lighting, and insufficient provision of

protective equipment such as masks and appropriate work attire. Two Syrian workers, Mehmet (25) and Salih (46), interviewed during the field research, reported being directly harmed by the glue used in the manufacturing process. Mehmet recounted, “They didn't even give me proper gloves; my hands swelled up from the glue,” while Salih mentioned developing a lung disease from prolonged exposure to the glue. When asked if they reported these issues to their supervisors, both responded similarly: “If you are not working, the door is there.”

Ece, a 30-year-old citizen worker, also highlighted the poor working conditions related to worker health and safety. She described the factory as lacking in hygiene, with insufficient ventilation, and noted the pervasive presence of fumes from chemical adhesives, paints, and thinners:

> "The environment is full of smoke. We use a lot of chemical adhesives; the place smells of paint thinner, glue... We were inhaling these... But when the inspection came, they had them removed immediately. There was nothing to be seen. During the pandemic, for example, we used a mask for two or three days. I have asthma now. They didn't give us proper masks; we had the cheapest ones during the pandemic period, then they didn't have any more. I got asthma from the fumes and gas of that plastic. We told them a hundred times. We reported it to superiors, we put complaint letters into the complaint box, but nothing changed. Long before this union thing, we had an accident at work where we almost died. We went to the emergency room in an ambulance. Now I have a crooked nasal bone. The workplace called me for reconciliation, so that I wouldn't file a lawsuit or file a complaint. They said, ‘You can file a complaint if you want, but nothing will happen, you will keep on struggling for years, you will keep going to the courts.’ I didn't want to deal with it at that time. It was difficult to find a new job and to take time off to go to court all the time, and I was a bit scared. I was afraid that I would not be able to find a job if I got into a lawsuit somewhere. I withdrew my complaint, I didn't even get compensation, I just took a week off.” (Ece, 30, Citizen Worker, Female)

These accounts starkly illustrate the severe shortcomings in the factory's approach to worker health and safety, where workers' well-being is consistently subordinated to the demands of production. The pervasive neglect of safety protocols not only

endangers the physical health of the workers but also erodes their sense of security and agency, further compounding the oppressive working environment.

Our interviewee Ece, who refrained from filing a complaint after being injured at work due to the fear of enduring a prolonged legal battle, and our interviewee Engin, who remarked, “the bosses are rich after all; they have power. Somehow they are right in court,” both reflect a pervasive mistrust among workers in the judicial system's ability to uphold their rights. This sentiment was echoed by other workers we interviewed, who shared similar concerns about the courts' inability to protect their legal entitlements. The apprehension that protracted legal proceedings, coupled with the factory management's potential influence over authorities due to their power and wealth, would render any complaints or legal actions futile, deters workers from seeking legal redress.

This deep-seated mistrust in the judicial system and the intimidating nature of prolonged legal processes can be understood as an outcome of neoliberalism's broader strategy to weaken unions and undermine working-class organizations (McIlroy, 1995). In the neoliberal era, courts have increasingly adopted a market-oriented, liberal stance, not only on labour rights but also on social rights more broadly. This shift has led to the erosion of established rights and a significant decline in the working class's confidence in the judiciary (O'Connell, 2011). David Harvey encapsulates this neoliberal logic by noting:

> "The frequent appeal to legal action furthermore accepts the neoliberal preference for appeal to judicial and executive rather than parliamentary powers. But it is costly and time-consuming to go down legal paths, and the courts are in any case heavily biased towards ruling class interests, given the typical class allegiance of the judiciary. Legal decisions tend to favour rights of private property and the profit rate over rights of equality and social justice” (Harvey, 2007: 176-177).

This analysis highlights how the neoliberal restructuring of legal institutions contributes to the disempowerment of workers, fostering a climate of fear and resignation rather than one of resistance and advocacy for labour rights.

4.4 Relations between native and migrant workers and ethnic hierarchy

In the AKBL factory, which employs approximately 550 registered workers, distinctions among the workforce extend beyond ethnic or national lines, reflecting the broader sociocultural fabric of Gaziantep, a city shaped by historical migration. Through the semi-structured interviews conducted, we identified five primary groupings within the factory: Sunni Turks, Sunni Kurds, Turkmen Alevis, Syrian Turkmens, and Syrian Arabs. These groups are further stratified into sub-groups based on regional origins and kinship ties, such as the "Kahramanmaraşlılar" (people from Kahramanmaraş), "Suruçlular" (residents from Suruç, a Kurdish-majority district of Şanlıurfa that experienced significant migration to Antep in the 1990s), and "Göksüncüklüler" (residents from a rural neighborhood in central Gaziantep).

These identity-based groupings play a crucial role in employment dynamics within the factory, influencing not only the process of securing jobs but also job retention and opportunities for advancement. For instance, Engin, a Turkmen Alevi who began working at the factory in 2013, secured his position through the assistance of his relative, Hakan, who had been employed there since 2010. Similarly, the group of more than 35 workers from Göksüncük operated as a cohesive unit during the unionization process, with younger members expressing their willingness to join the union only if their senior counterparts were convinced, leading to a collective approach in their decision-making.

However, while these identity-based groupings facilitate solidarity and mutual support in certain aspects, they can also contribute to internal competition and fragmentation within the factory. This potential for division is evident in how these groups influence the division of labour, relationships with management, and union membership. Despite these underlying dynamics, the groupings at the AKBL factory have not escalated to a level where they disrupt overall worker solidarity during the unionization process. Hakan, who progressed from a worker in 2010 to a section supervisor in the plastic injection molding department in 2016, emphasized that although these groupings exist, they do not undermine worker unity within the factory. He further noted that there is no discrimination among workers, sharing an example of how the Göksüncük group supported him by constructing his house after marriage without charging him, highlighting the potential for intergroup cooperation and solidarity even across political or ideological divides.

Engin, a male worker who has been employed at the AKBL factory since 2013 and identifies as a Turkmen Alevi, reflected on the changes in the factory's atmosphere over time, stating, "There used to be fewer people, and the factory had a happier atmosphere. The bosses expanded the business, and around 2015, Syrians began to work here. We didn’t have much trouble with the Syrian Turkmens, but unfortunately, the number of Arabs increased over time. While there were groupings in the factory, there was no pressure on anyone because they were Kurdish or Arab. But whenever there was a dispute with Syrians, it was immediately said that anyone who betrays his homeland would betray his wife." This sentiment, which distinguishes Syrian Turkmens as more acceptable compared to Syrian Arabs, was echoed by other citizen workers interviewed for this study.

Syrian Turkmens, due to their ability to speak Turkish, their ethnic background, and their ancestral connections to Turkey, have generally managed to establish relatively closer relationships with citizen workers. In contrast, Syrian Arabs, primarily due to the language barrier, occupy the lowest position in the ethnic hierarchy within the AKBL Factory. Alpman (2016: 150), in his fieldwork with Kurdish workers in Istanbul, notes that "language barriers, especially for oppressed identities, when combined with the migration process, serve to deepen the class relations of exploitation by reinforcing mechanisms of domination." At the AKBL Factory, Syrian Arab workers are particularly disadvantaged, as they lack the everyday resistance and objection mechanisms available to other workers due to these language barriers.

For instance, in departments where different tasks vary in terms of function and physical strain, citizen workers can sometimes request a change in their assigned duties when they feel fatigued or for other reasons. While this request might occasionally be granted to citizen workers, despite the stringent factory regime, such flexibility is not afforded to Syrian workers, whether Turkmen or Arab. Salih, a 46-year-old Syrian worker under Temporary Protection Status (TPS), explained his experience:

> "They used to favor locals when assigning tasks. One of my friends wanted to switch places with me because he found his department too difficult. He went to the foreman and was told, ‘Switch places if you want, if you don't, there's the door.’ It was offensive, especially since I had been working there for years. I developed lung disease from the glue I was working with and asked to be moved several times, but they wouldn’t do it. They would do it for locals, but if you're Syrian, you have no choice. There are children and rent to consider. There is no other comfortable place to go; they are all the same." (Salih, 46, Syrian worker under TPS, Male)

Similarly, Mehmet, a 25-year-old Syrian worker under TPS, shared his experience:

> "The machines are too fast. When you can't keep up, the shift supervisor gets angry and swears. I was buckling and gluing slippers, not working as a packer. Packing is an easy job, and they gave it to their own people. You have to finish 6 pairs in 6 minutes, 12 pairs in 12 minutes. If you can't do it, they tell you to leave. The packers and machinists get the highest salary, but the buckler does the most work. The better you work, the more you're exploited, but the pay is still low. You can't say anything because you're Syrian. Syrians have to work; you work for whatever you're given." (Mehmet, 25, Syrian worker under TPS, Male)

These narratives highlight the systemic inequalities and discrimination faced by Syrian workers in the factory, exacerbated by ethnic and linguistic differences. The experiences of these workers underscore the broader issues of exploitation and marginalization within the workplace, particularly for those who are already vulnerable due to their migrant status.

The statements made by Syrian workers, such as "If you are Syrian, you have come to work, you have no other choice" and "If you are Syrian, you have to work, you will work for whatever you are given," encapsulate the precarious and constrained position of Syrians within the Turkish labour market. The obligations and vulnerabilities associated with being a migrant in Turkey compel Syrian workers to exhibit greater submissiveness to the patterns of discrimination and violence that pervade their workplaces (Erol et al., 100). Although this submissiveness may not constitute full-fledged domination, it does lead to a muted response to injustices or an "invisible" avoidance of situations that could exacerbate tensions within the factory. This dynamic often results in a strategic withdrawal from potential conflicts, particularly in interactions with citizen workers.

Salih, a Syrian worker whom we interviewed about his relations with citizen workers, illustrated this point by stating:

> "We worked for 5-6 years, thank God. Our old friends always respected us. Those who worked with us did not see any bad behavior from us, and we did not see any bad behavior from them. Sorry, for example, there were single

> women (citizen women workers) there. Our men (Syrians) used to stay away from women. Because they stayed away, our men were comfortable in the factory. But if someone tried to get a girlfriend or meet girls, then there would definitely be a fight. Now, for example, our friends became distanced. They would talk, joke around, but as friends, not as lovers. For example, we have a friend Fethi, he had a girlfriend from the factory, got engaged, and then got married. I used to tell my friends (Syrians) to 'stay away from girls.' I knew there would be fights, we had to keep a low profile. Look, they used to make us do the hardest jobs. We would do it. What are you going to talk about, we can't talk about anything. If we do, they will say 'go away'" (Salih, 46, Syrian Worker under TPS, Male).

The experience of Syrian refugees in Turkey is marked by an acute awareness of their precarious legal status, which is exacerbated by the temporary protection regime that fails to fully safeguard them from the threat of deportation. This vulnerability, coupled with pervasive anti-immigrant sentiment, compels Syrian workers to adopt a strategy of maintaining a low profile both in the workplace and in broader social life. As Salih's account illustrates, Syrian workers at the AKBL Factory deliberately maintain a distant relationship with female workers to avoid conflicts with citizen male workers, thereby minimizing the risk of attracting negative attention.

This phenomenon of self-effacement extends beyond the factory setting into various aspects of social life for Syrians in Turkey. For instance, Syrian women who dress like locals to obscure their Syrian identity, Syrian students who exclusively speak Turkish even among themselves in university settings (Gül & Kaylı, 2020: 998), and Syrians who introduce themselves as Lebanese or adopt the Gaziantep dialect (Vesek, 2021: 97) all reflect strategies of concealing their identity to navigate an increasingly hostile environment. Particularly for Syrian women, this imperative to remain invisible often translates into a restricted social sphere, limited primarily to the home and immediate neighborhood, as a means of ensuring their safety (Uçar, 2020: 50).

In the context of the AKBL Factory, while Syrian workers cannot entirely conceal their identity, they nonetheless strive to remain inconspicuous by demonstrating a greater degree of submission to harsh working conditions compared to their citizen counterparts, by voicing fewer objections, and by carefully managing their interactions with other workers, especially women. This strategy reflects the broader pressures faced by Syrian refugees to navigate their precarious existence within the Turkish labour market and society at large.

From our interviews with both citizen and Syrian workers, as well as trade unionists, it is evident that intense and violent hostility toward immigrants within the AKBL factory is not prevalent. Several factors contribute to this relatively calm atmosphere, including the absence of wage disparities between workers and the tendency of Syrian workers to remain inconspicuous in the workplace. This observation aligns with the notion that the visibility of wage differences often exacerbates tensions between different groups of workers (Milkman, 2006). Additionally, the subdued presence of Syrian workers, who avoid drawing attention to themselves, may contribute to the relative absence of overt hostility.

However, despite the lack of overt hostility, citizen workers are not immune to the influence of pervasive and semi-disinformative discourses prevalent in the broader public sphere. As mentioned in the previous subchapter, workers like Turgut and Hakan have internalized common but misleading narratives such as "the state gives houses to Syrians," "they receive regular wages and aid from the state," and "Syrians are exempt from taxation." These narratives are frequently propagated in public discourse and contribute to shaping the perceptions of citizen workers. For instance, Hakan, a citizen worker, expressed his initial skepticism about Syrians based on these narratives, stating:

> "Normal workers couldn't do it, but my Syrian neighbor used to make meat kebabs once a month. I'm not sure if they get any extra help from the state, but they are exempt from taxes, as you know. The state provides them with convenience. I don't know if they steal or not. They have many shops in the bazaar. Syrians who work for minimum wage and live in the same house opened a car dealership; they have a lot of shops in the bazaar. When you see them, you get confused. I swear I was thinking like this at first, before I got to know them." (Hakan, 37, Citizen Worker, Male)

The perceptions expressed by Hakan and echoed by other interviewees—such as the belief that the state provides special conveniences to immigrants, that they are exempt from taxes, and that they accumulate wealth by pooling their incomes—are not unique to the Syrian migrant experience. These sentiments have been similarly expressed about other immigrant groups in the past, reflecting a recurrent theme in the social construction of immigrants as "others" (Nichols & Suğur, 2004: 95).

The entrenchment of these perceptions among citizen workers is further reinforced by far-right political rhetoric, which scapegoats immigrants for the economic challenges facing Turkey. This scapegoating, as discussed by Koca and Saç (2024: 340), frames immigrants as the primary culprits for the nation's economic woes, thereby fueling anti-immigrant sentiments. During the unionization process at the AKBL factory, the DİSK Textile Union actively sought to counter these semi-disinformative discourses that threatened to undermine worker solidarity. This effort to combat misinformation was crucial in fostering a more inclusive environment within the factory, as we will explore in the next chapter.

To conclude this section, it is worth reflecting on the words of Mehmet, a Syrian worker, when asked about his relationships with citizen workers before the unionization process began:

> "Idiots are everywhere. There were a lot of idiots in the factory too. I couldn't talk to anyone properly except our friends (Syrians), but they would talk behind my back. They would say stupid things like 'Suri, Suri,' but I pretended not to hear them. I didn't have friends there before. Friends are

> there in bad times. Then the union started. This time, as I counted the number of members of the union, I started counting friends." (Mehmet, 25, Syrian Worker under TPS, Male)

Mehmet's experience underscores the transformative potential of collective action and unionization in overcoming initial prejudices and building solidarity across ethnic and national lines.

I have observed, however, hat perceptions and attitudes toward Syrian workers under TPS have undergone a notable transformation through the shared experience of union membership and collective struggle. The previously common view, which labelled Syrian workers under TPS as "people who sell their homeland also sell their wives," has been reshaped by the steadfast and determined behaviour of Syrian workers during the unionization process. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, following this process, local workers in the factory began to describe Syrian workers as individuals who "stand firm" and are "reliable."

This shift—from the derogatory sentiment of "whoever sells his homeland sells his wife" to the acknowledgment of "well done, they stood firm better than us"—has significantly influenced interpersonal relations within the factory. Two major consequences of this change are the reduction in swearing and insults directed at Syrian workers by citizen workers and supervisors, and a noticeable decrease in the willingness of citizen workers to swap tasks with Syrians when they feel fatigued.

CHAPTER 5

PASSING THE NARROW GATE: UNIONISATION AND UNITED IN STRUGGLE

5.1 The Beginning of Unionisation at AKBL Factory

"We were looking for a decent union and finally found it."
(Barış, 44, Citizen Worker, Male)

The AKBL factory, situated in Gaziantep's Başpınar Organized Industrial Zone No. 2, officially employs approximately 550 workers, primarily engaged in the production of contract slippers and shoes. As previously mentioned, the AKBL factory has garnered a negative reputation not only among its own workers but also among those who have been employed in other factories in the Başpınar region, as well as among trade unionists who have long been involved in labour struggles in the area. This reputation stems from the harsh working conditions and the absence of compensation following dismissals. In late June 2021, direct workers reached out to the DİSK Textile Union, expressing their desire to unionize at the AKBL factory, thereby initiating unionization efforts at the facility.

Barış, a male worker who was one of the leading figures in the unionization process and a member of two workplace committees, described the process of discovering the DİSK Tekstil Union as follows:

> "I worked for 7.5 years, doing everything they asked of me, being used. Yet, I only earned 100 liras more than someone who didn't know the job. Imagine that—someone with 7.5 years of experience earning the same as someone who just walked in the door. Everyone had complaints. As I mentioned, the shuttle buses were old, the food was rancid, and you couldn't even drink more than one glass of water. Two colleagues were particularly interested in unionizing. They had been working even longer and were discussing what might happen if the union came in. But we couldn't trust just anyone. We told them, 'You do some research. Find out which union is good and won't betray us. Not all unions are the same; you can't trust them.' Eventually, our friends came back and said they found one. They assured us that this union would

> stand by us and wouldn't sell us out. We checked Facebook, the internet, and newspapers and realized that this man, Ahmet—the Regional Representative of the union—stands by the workers. Ahmet's speeches gave us confidence." (Barış, 44, Citizen Worker, Male)

The lack of trust in trade unions among workers stems not only from the failures, mistakes, and betrayals embedded in the collective memory of the working class but also from the weakening of trade unions and labour organizations as a result of the neoliberal transformation process. As various studies have shown, trust in labour unions remains low (Urhan, 2005; Urhan & Selamoğlu, 2008; Hekimler & Kağnıcıoğlu, 2009; Hekimler, 2015). As Buğra et al. (2005) highlight, within precarious labour relations, it is challenging to build trust and confidence in trade unions among workers in an environment where "workers fear losing their jobs, laws are unfavorable to workers, unions are constrained by new legislation and the dominant ideology, and as a result of this pressure, they prioritize their own organizational survival over developing policies for the working class" (p. 39). The pioneering workers at the AKBL Factory, who recognized the need to unionize to improve their working conditions, likely faced this distrust. To overcome this skepticism, the workers appointed two of their colleagues to investigate and identify a trustworthy union. Unfortunately, I was unable to interview these two key workers as part of our field research, and therefore, I could not directly learn about the process of "searching for a decent union" from the actors themselves. I will share the reason for this later in this section. Nevertheless, it can be inferred that several factors, such as the union's reputation and management among workers, its track record of successful struggles, its political affiliations, and its authorization to negotiate collective bargaining agreements, likely played a role in determining the

appropriate union. Ultimately, the workers at the AKBL Factory decided to engage in negotiations with the DİSK Textile Union.

Our interviewee Yusuf, a trade union expert, mentioned that workers from the AKBL factory had previously contacted the same union in 2015-2016, but no organizing efforts were initiated at that time. He describes the beginning of the current process as follows:

> "Workers from AKBL reached out to us directly. Among them were both citizens and Syrians. It was just before Eid. The working conditions at AKBL were extremely poor, making organization difficult. Previous attempts had been made, but they were unsuccessful. We didn't have any ongoing efforts there either; it wasn't a place we had specifically targeted as a union. The workers approached the union directly to meet with us. We sat down and discussed the methods and feasibility of organizing, and we devised a plan. The factory operated in two shifts, so we formed two separate workplace committees for each shift to facilitate the organizing efforts. One of the committees included Syrian workers." (Yusuf, Trade Union Expert, Male)

According to the prevailing laws in Turkey, for a union to be eligible to negotiate a collective bargaining agreement at a workplace, it must organize at least one percent of all workers in the specific industry in which the union operates and obtain authorization from the Ministry. As per the statistics published by the Ministry of Labour and Social Security in January 2021, there are 1,219,957 workers in the Weaving, Garment, and Leather Sector (Branch No. 5), where the Textile Union is established. The Textile Union, however, falls slightly below the 'union threshold' with 12,037 members (ÇSGB, 2021). The next set of statistics is expected to be released by the Ministry in July. Given this context, it is understandable that the union has set realistic and achievable targets for organizing workplaces in the short term. In our interview, Ahmet, the regional representative of the union, mentioned that there was a divergence between the understanding of trade unionism at the union’s headquarters and their own perspective in the region. Nevertheless, the

headquarters assigned and authorized him to work in the region specifically to achieve the union surpass the membership threshold. Ahmet differentiates his stance from that of DİSK Textile Union's headquarters, asserting that his approach is rooted in 'class trade unionism,' which he claims the headquarters fails to uphold. Similar criticisms have been raised by various labour organizations in Turkey, alleging that the General Centre of DİSK Textile Union has engaged in covert agreements with workplace management during multiple unionisation efforts, thereby adopting positions contrary to the interests of workers (Uğur & Çiloğlan, 2010; Nalbant & Akan, 2023).

5.2 The instrumentalisation of the trade union by the workers: Dissolution of first workplace committees

After an initial meeting between the workers and the DISK-Textile Union, the first formal meeting to organize at the AKBL Factory took place at the union's office in central Gaziantep. During this meeting, several key topics were discussed: the previous unsuccessful attempt at unionization at the AKBL Factory, the fundamental demands that would guide the current unionization efforts, and whether the organizing work should be conducted openly or in secret. Given that the factory operates in two shifts—day and night—two separate workplace committees were formed among the pioneering workers. These committees serve as organizing bodies, established to conduct unionization activities covertly from the employer until a sufficient number of members have been recruited and an application for authorization can be submitted to the Ministry (Çoban, 2013: 399). In a factory like AKBL, where working conditions and pressure on workers are particularly harsh, and where a previous unionization effort had failed, it is imperative that organizing

efforts be carried out with absolute secrecy. If not, the employer could swiftly implement a range of anti-union practices, particularly dismissals, which could derail the entire process before it even begins.

Ahmet and Yusuf, the trade unionists who were deeply involved in the organizing efforts at the AKBL Factory, emphasized from the very first meeting the critical importance of confidentiality. They made it clear that secrecy was essential to the success of the unionization process. However, the initial workplace committees, which were established to lead the unionization efforts within the factory, were disbanded just a few weeks after their formation, before they had even reached 30 members. When we inquired about the reasons for this dissolution, we were informed that two citizen workers, who had initially approached the union expressing their desire to organize at the AKBL Factory, openly conducted the organizing activities that should have been carried out with strict secrecy. These workers discussed the union in front of supervisors and managers and even recruited members in their presence. Engin, a citizen worker who has been employed at the factory since 2013, commented on the situation:

> "Hamdi and Yavuz were the first to come here to start the unionization effort. Everyone was already fed up with the conditions, so we began with a lot of excitement. We formed committees at the workplace, and I joined when there were only 10-15 members. But then they got themselves fired. The same men who told us we needed to work in secret were openly talking about the union in front of the supervisor. Later, we heard they had debts and were saying that if they got compensation, they would use it to pay off their debts." (Engin, 30, Citizen Worker, Male)

Yusuf, a trade union expert, highlights that the practice of workers instrumentalizing unions not for genuine organizing but to secure compensation from the employer is common among workers in Gaziantep. He notes:

> "Workers in Gaziantep have this attitude. They turn to the union when they're in trouble, when they want to quit their jobs, to ensure they don't lose their compensation. They use it, you know." (Yusuf, Trade Union Expert, Male)

Hamdi and Yavuz, who initially approached the union to organize at the AKBL factory, joined the first committees formed and engaged in open organizing activities. According to our interviewees, they achieved their goal and left their jobs after receiving their compensation. This practice, referred to as "using the union," is reportedly widespread among the working class in Antep. It would be frequently employed by workers at the AKBL Factory, particularly during periods when faith in successful unionization diminished.

After Hamdi and Yavuz left, the initial committees quickly disbanded, forcing the trade union to restart the organizing process. This time, the union approached the task with greater determination and resolve. However, by this point, the workplace management had become aware that, after five years, another unionization attempt was underway in the factory and that DİSK Tekstil was making efforts to organize its workers. The management may have felt some relief when the initial organizers left with their severance pay.

Following the dissolution of the workplace committees, new committees were formed from scratch to lead the organization, and a more discreet organizing effort began. These committees included seven pioneer workers on the day shift and six on the night shift, with half of the members being Syrian workers. This marked the beginning of an exceptional union activity, where approximately 25% of the 25 Syrian workers, who were formally employed in the factory, took the lead in the organizing efforts. Notably, Syrian workers not only encouraged other Syrians to join the union but also called upon citizen workers to become members.

5.3 Second phase of unionization: Building common demands

After the failure of the first unionization attempt, the second organizing effort at the AKBL factory began at the end of July, leading to the formation of two new workplace committees. These committees were composed of a total of 13 pioneering workers, 6 of whom were Syrian workers. Although this effort did not achieve tangible successes such as obtaining authorization or formal unionization, the unionization activity led by the DİSK Textile Union at the AKBL Factory holds a significant place in the history of the Turkish labour movement. It represents the first instance of an organizing activity being led by Syrian workers under temporary protection status.

During the unionization process that commenced at the end of July, trade unionists and pioneering workers articulated demands under four main categories, organized these demands among the workers, and developed "common demands" to increase union membership. The union's goals can be categorized into four key areas: wages, weekly holidays, factory regime, and food and water. One of the primary objectives articulated by the union was to raise wages, which had been equalized at the minimum wage level. In the event of successful unionization at the AKBL Factory, the union aimed to negotiate a collective bargaining agreement with the employer that would result in wage increases. As discussed in the section on working conditions, the AKBL Factory had a wage policy where all workers received almost the same wage, regardless of their length of service, and this wage was pegged to the minimum wage set by the government each year. Trade unionists and pioneering members of the workplace committee emphasized to the workers that, if successful, their wages would not be limited to the minimum wage, but would instead be raised.

Another frequently voiced demand was the introduction of a Saturday holiday for night shift workers. In the AKBL Factory, which operated in two shifts, day shift workers enjoyed two days off on Saturday and Sunday, while night shift workers were required to work on Saturdays as well. The demand to secure Saturday as a holiday resonated with the workers.

In the AKBL Factory, characterized by a strict and oppressive factory regime, workers often felt uncomfortable during both the production process and their breaks. They were subjected to mistreatment and worked under the constant surveillance of security guards. The union's message that successful unionization would reduce the pressure on workers, allowing them to work and rest more comfortably, was well received. Mistreatment of workers is a direct assault on their dignity (Hodson, 2001: 19) and ale workers of ASBL Factory frequently endure swearing and insults from their supervisors when tasks are not completed on time, and even minor infractions, such as exceeding the strict 10-minute limit for toilet breaks by just a few minutes, result in workers being shouted at and formally reported. Ece, the only female worker I interviewed during the field research, shared the following insight:

> "During this 10-minute break, we could be a few minutes late. I am very sorry, we are women after all. We have special days. Naturally, you are a few minutes late. When you come out, they shout at you in public, asking where you were, why you were late, if you were talking on the phone, or if you were shirking work. It embarrasses you. You don't tell them it's your special day. Even for this, they kept a report. I might have 15 minutes, but there was nothing worth noting. I don't have any work-related reports; no one can say anything. It's always for such trivial reasons. Why did you stay in the WC so long? Why did you smoke for so long?" (Ece, 30, Citizen Worker, Female)

In addition to these harsh working conditions, the factory, one of the largest slipper producers in the country, prohibited workers from wearing slippers, despite the factory's temperatures often exceeding 40 degrees Celsius due to both geographic

and production factors. As a result, one of the key demands during the unionization process was for workers to be allowed to wear slippers instead of shoes in departments and during times when it did not pose a threat to health and safety. Furthermore, the pioneer workers emphasized that successful unionization would enable them to secure more nutritious and satisfying meals, as well as unlimited drinking water, instead of the unhealthy and unappealing meals currently provided. They actively recruited workers to the union, particularly during breaks and after work, to achieve these goals.

Another significant aspect of the unionization effort was the focus on "union compensation." Under Turkish law, specifically the Law on Collective Bargaining and Trade Unions, workers are entitled to compensation equivalent to one year's wages if they are dismissed for being a union member or participating in union activities (Öztürk, 2013). This compensation was used by trade unions as a powerful organizing tool. The prospect of receiving union compensation if dismissed for union activities further encouraged the growth of the organizing effort.

The unionization activities, which resumed at the end of July during what was the hottest summer for migrants in a political and social environment marked by rising anti-immigrant sentiment, were conducted with great secrecy. The new workplace committees, established after the "abusive" workers who had used the union to secure their compensation and then openly conducted activities in front of managers and supervisors, successfully recruited more than 60 workers into the union at the AKBL Factory. Engin, a citizen worker who started working at the AKBL Factory in 2013, mentioned that during this period, they fostered stronger social connections among workers, playing football on the astroturf pitch and going on picnics. The turning point in the unionization process at the AKBL Factory, which

progressed along these lines until August 10, was the dismissal of Hakan, a section supervisor in the plastic injection department who had been with the factory since 2010. He was dismissed under the pretext of damaging work machines. After his dismissal, Hakan, who was relatively well-liked by his colleagues and was also a union member, put on the union apron and began protesting in front of the AKBL Factory, demanding, "I want my job back." August 10 marked the beginning of the open conflict between the union and workplace management.

5.4 The rise of unionization and the resistance in front of the factory

> “I couldn't work inside, so I started working in front of the factory”.
> (Hakan, 37, Citizen Worker, Male)

By August 10th, the day Hakan was dismissed—marking the second week after the workplace committees were re-established and began to function—the DİSK Textile Union had garnered approximately 60 members within the factory. In the subsequent two weeks following Hakan’s dismissal and his subsequent protest in front of the factory, number of union members tripled. This rapid increase in membership was attributable not only to the union's strategic efforts to organize key figures among the local groups within the factory but also to the workers' perception of union membership as an act of solidarity with Hakan, reflecting their collective support for him. The third labour agent we interviewed during our field research, a trade unionist and one of the leading figures in the 1996 Ünaldı resistance, whom we will refer to as Cebrail throughout this thesis, provided insightful commentary on the workers' support for Hakan. He stated:

> "Typically, when a worker is expelled, it instills fear among the remaining workers, causing union activity to slow down and leading members to resign. However, after Hakan was expelled, we experienced the opposite effect—our

> membership tripled. Hakan had been a worker for 10 years and was very well-liked among his peers. For a while, he protested alone in front of the factory before Mehmet was expelled. Under normal circumstances, workers might have been intimidated by the presence of the union flag, union vest, and the overall resistance situation, which could have made them uneasy. During that time, the management was holding meetings to figure out how to remove those protesting at the gate, but instead, workers would greet Hakan during their lunch breaks, and even the female workers brought him tea. When the workplace management observed this, they realized that dismissals would not be an effective strategy to repel the union." (Cebrail, Labour Agent, Male)

Cebrail's account highlights the resilience of the workers and the counterproductive nature of the management's attempt to use dismissals as a means of suppressing union activity. Instead of demoralizing the workforce, Hakan's dismissal galvanized them, leading to increased solidarity and a surge in union membership. This narrative underscores the significance of worker solidarity in the face of managerial tactics aimed at undermining collective action.

Interviews conducted reveal that Hakan, who had been employed at the factory since 2010 and served as a manager in the plastic injection moulding department since 2016, was a highly regarded and respected figure among the workers. He recounts the circumstances surrounding his dismissal and subsequent resistance in front of the factory as follows:

> "Our colleagues had joined the union. We didn't trust the union; they had come around 5-6 years ago, and I didn't trust them then. But I trusted Ahmet (the regional union representative); he had influence and power, and I trusted him. So, I joined the union, and that was it. A few days later, the production manager confronted me, saying, 'You're a member of the union, and you've been recruiting others.' I replied, 'That's true, but is that a crime?' Following that, they decided to remove me from my supervisory position. I told them, 'Let me consult my lawyer, and I'll get back to you,' after which I returned to work. I don't know whether it was fate or something else, but shortly afterward, the machine I was operating broke down. I called the maintenance foreman, and we disassembled and reassembled the machine together, but we couldn't fix it. After that incident, they put me on leave. Within 10 days, they filed a report and took me to court, accusing me of breaking the machine. After that, I started working outside (he laughs, referring to his protest)." (Hakan, 37, Citizen Worker, Male)

Hakan's statement, "they put me on leave," highlights a common practice employed by Turkish businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. On 17 April 2020, dismissal of workers was banned in Turkey due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This ban continued until 1 July 2021. During this period, employers frequently resorted to the use of unpaid leave, whereby workers' contracts were suspended, meaning they did not work and consequently did not receive wages. According to the Labour Law, unpaid leave is a practice that can only be implemented with the mutual agreement of both the employer and the employee, as it is legally valid only if the employee consents to the employer's request for such leave. However, in practice, workers often accept unpaid leave under the threat of dismissal or mobbing. Moreover, there was an exception to the dismissal ban during the pandemic. Article 25/2 of the Labour Law allows employers to terminate employment if the worker behaves in a manner contrary to morality and goodwill. This right to termination, commonly referred to as *Kod-29* in public discourse, was widely exploited by employers during the pandemic. In 2020 alone, 177,000 workers were dismissed on the grounds of "behaviours contrary to morality and goodwill" (DİSK-AR, 2021). The lifting of the pandemic-era dismissal ban, combined with employers' ability to use unpaid leave, emerged as one of the key obstacles in the unionisation process at the AKBL Factory. As will be shown throughout the case study, the practice of unpaid leave was frequently used to isolate pioneering workers from their peers, thereby hindering union efforts.

Hakan, initially a regular union member, began to forge a closer relationship with the union following his dismissal. With the guidance and support of the union, he initiated a protest in front of the factory, wearing the union apron in a bid to achieve reinstatement. The union's provision of legal assistance and daily financial

support was crucial in enabling Hakan to sustain his resistance outside the workplace. The financial aid provided by unions to dismissed or striking workers is essential, as it allows them to continue their struggle during periods when they are deprived of wage income (Katz et al., 2017: 93). When trade unions fail to take decisive action against dismissals—a common tactic employed by employers within de-unionisation strategies—beyond pursuing legal processes, it undermines workers' trust in the union and reinforces the perception that union membership is closely linked with unemployment (Urhan, 2008: 186). The DİSK Textile Union's active involvement in advocating for the reinstatement of a worker dismissed for union activities, coupled with its legal support, visible presence, and most importantly, its daily financial aid during the resistance, significantly enhanced the workers' trust in the union at the AKBL factory. This, in turn, led to a marked increase in union membership. Engin, a fellow worker, expressed his thoughts on the union's support for Hakan's resistance:

> "The union was supportive. Most importantly, they provided legal assistance. They also provided daily stipends, food, and drink. Although it wasn't the same as wages, it was still support. We inside the factory knew that the union stood behind Hakan. This gave us confidence. At the time, there were two prevailing attitudes among the workers. After Hakan was dismissed, some were fearful, thinking, 'They'll dismiss us too.' Others thought, 'What happens to him today could happen to us tomorrow.' As time passed, more workers joined the union. There was also a sentiment among the workers that, 'If Hakan is sitting there, they can't fire us, because those who get fired will join him.' In this way, his presence outside strengthened us inside. We grew the union more easily." (Engin, 40, Citizen Worker, Male)

Shortly thereafter, Mehmet, a Syrian worker under Temporary Protection Status (TPS), was also dismissed and joined Hakan in the resistance outside the factory. The protest area, marked by a banner declaring "Union is a right, it cannot be prevented, the union will enter AKBL," became a gathering place for other workers during lunch breaks and at the start and end of shifts, despite management's prohibitions.

Workers brought food, water, and tea to their dismissed colleagues, engaging with them during these breaks. Barış, a member of the workplace committee and a key figure in this process, reflected on the resistance initiated by Hakan:

> "Actually, Hakan and I had a quarrel before; I wouldn't speak to him. He assigned workers to machines and gave me trouble. That's why I kept my distance and didn't like him. But when Hakan was dismissed without compensation, I decided to support Hakan, regardless of our past. Whether I was his enemy or an adversary, I stood by him. What happened to him today could happen to me tomorrow—and it did. Hakan's dismissal also influenced the increase in union membership. His close friends and acquaintances joined the union. Everyone has their own circle. We used to visit Hakan after work to show our support. Some workers came specifically so the employer would see them. They didn't care much about the union; they just wanted the employer to notice them and then give them compensation and let them go." (Barış, 44, Male, Worker)

Barış's account illustrates that the increase in union membership following Hakan's dismissal was driven not only by respect and admiration for Hakan but also by workers' fear that management, which could dismiss a well-regarded supervisor like Hakan without compensation, might do the same to them. This fear was temporarily alleviated by the union's material and moral support for Hakan, leading to a rise in union membership. However, some workers, less interested in union solidarity, sought to use the situation to their advantage, hoping to get fired and receive compensation.

Based on Barış's account, the surge in union membership at the factory following Hakan's dismissal was driven not only by the workers' admiration and respect for Hakan but also by their concern that management, which could dismiss a well-regarded and popular supervisor like Hakan without compensation, might do the same to them. This concern was temporarily alleviated by the material and moral support provided to Hakan by the union, leading to an increase in union membership. However, an opportunistic behavior was also observed among some workers. After

the factory management warned workers against visiting Hakan and installed security cameras in the protest area to monitor activity, it was alleged that some workers who were not involved in the unionization process, did not attend meetings, and made no efforts to organize the union, were frequenting Hakan with the intent of getting themselves dismissed and securing compensation. As a result, after Hakan's dismissal and the commencement of his resistance in front of the factory, the number of union members exceeded 180, bringing the unionization effort close to success.

Notably, among the 550 workers at the AKBL factory, approximately 5%—or 25 workers—are Syrian workers under Temporary Protection Status (TPS), and 24 of these 25 workers joined the DİSK Textile Union. This high level of interest among Syrian workers in the union can be attributed to the fact that nearly half of the workplace committee is composed of Syrian workers, and the union has emphasized anti-immigrant solidarity and class unity as central issues since the beginning of the process. During the unionization process at the AKBL Factory, where Syrian workers under TPS played a pivotal role both as pioneer and regular members, one Syrian worker who was dismissed also participated in the symbolic resistance at the factory gate alongside Hakan.

Mehmet, the Syrian worker under TPS, who arrived in Turkey at the age of 16 from Aleppo and whom we refer to as Mehmet throughout this thesis, had been working formally at the AKBL Factory for 1.5 years when the unionization process began. Initially employed as a ‘trainee,’ Mehmet, 25 years old, had been actively involved in the unionization effort from the start. Following Hakan’s dismissal, Mehmet was also dismissed in a dramatic manner, ostensibly for his union activities. Mehmet's dismissal process is particularly noteworthy as it reflects the application of what he learned from the union, a process we refer to as the ‘school of struggle.’

> "After Hakan was dismissed, I went to him every day. I stood by him. He was resisting for us too. I used to joke, 'We'll be with you soon.' And so it happened. Shortly after Hakan, one day the accountant called me in and asked, 'Have you joined the union?' I denied it, saying, 'I swear I didn't, what union?' He then accused me of provoking others. I didn't confess because Ahmet (the Regional Representative of the union) had always advised us to stay hidden and not reveal ourselves. I thought they might try to get me to sign something. Ahmet had always told us, 'Don't sign anything without consulting us, don't send messages, don't put anything in writing.' They calculated my severance pay and offered me a sum, but said they couldn't pay it immediately. I needed to buy time until Ahmet arrived, so I asked to see the money immediately and demanded a reason for my dismissal. 'The boss doesn't like you,' the accountant said. I replied, 'What kind of reason is that? This is bullshit', hoping to provoke him into making a mistake. He started shouting and put a paper in front of me to sign. I said I needed to call my father because I didn't understand official matters, then stepped out to call Ahmet, who told me he was already at the factory. I refused to sign and left. The security guards stopped me, blocking the entrance gate, so I jumped over the side wall and ran to Ahmet at the front of the factory. I felt incredibly brave at that moment. Ahmet had left his work to come help. He argued with the accountant and security guards, shouting for me. This time I tried to calm him down. He wasn't doing this for himself, but for us. The police arrived, and it was clear whose side they were on—they stood by the factory. Actually Ahmet called the police, but they sided with the factory. I gave a statement to the police, who remarked, 'Both Syrian and unionized,' provoking Yusuf (a union organizer) to argue with them. I calmed him down too. 'I'm going to report you,' Yusuf shouted at the police. 'Who are you going to report to whom? You might as well report the boss too,' I joked, and we laughed." (Mehmet, 25, Syrian Worker under TPS, Male)

Mehmet's account of his dismissal underscores several key lessons imparted by the trade union to workers during the unionization process. First, Mehmet understood the importance of secrecy and the necessity of concealing his union membership. Second, he knew to report any disputes or issues with management related to the union to the union or workplace committees immediately. Third, he was aware that he should never sign any document presented by employers without consulting the union. Finally, Mehmet, experiencing formal employment and union involvement for the first time in his life, learned that law enforcement officers typically side with management, even when summoned by union representatives, and that reporting the employer to the police is futile. This experiential learning process, which Birelma,

drawing on Thompson, refers to as the acquisition of "a consciousness and subjectivity that can only be acquired through the daily experiences and struggles of labourers" (Birelma, 2014: 308), was instrumental in shaping Mehmet's approach to his dismissal and subsequent resistance.

After his dramatic dismissal, Mehmet, a Syrian worker under Temporary Protection Status (TPS), went to Hakan, as he had previously stated "I will be with you soon," and they began resisting together in front of the factory. Mehmet mentioned that they protested together for about 20 days and faced considerable pressure from his Syrian relatives and friends during this period, who repeatedly urged him to "sign your name and get your money." He also described having his most intense arguments with his father during this time:

> "My father cursed at me all evening, saying, '10 hours of work, good wages, insurance—where will you find these? You are stupid.' You can't argue much with your father; he's always right. He's the father, after all; you have to listen to him. 'They will beat you; we are foreigners,' he says. Maybe he's right, but he doesn't realize that I promised the man (referring to Ahmet, Regional Representative of the Union) that I wouldn't back down. Wherever I go, the same thing will happen." (Mehmet, 25, Syrian Worker under TPS, Male)

The workers' reaction to the dismissal of a fellow worker serves as a significant example of worker solidarity at the AKBL Factory. Despite the factory management's prohibition on contact with Hakan, who was protesting outside the factory, workers risked their own safety to speak with him at the factory entrances and exits. Female workers brought food and tea, demonstrating solidarity even at personal risk. This solidarity was further reinforced by the leadership and efforts of Ahmet, the regional representative of the union, who led the unionization process and stood by the dismissed workers. The combination of Hakan's internal and Ahmet's external leadership contributed to transforming the emerging solidarity at

the AKBL Factory from a "episodic and noncumulative" phenomenon into a sustained and growing movement, as described by Hodson (2001: 208).

As a result, the workers' loyalty and trust in the union increased when they saw the union apron on Hakan and Mehmet, who had been dismissed, and witnessed the unionists standing with them. This trust was further strengthened by the knowledge that their dismissed colleagues were supported financially, morally, and legally by the union, as well as the potential for union compensation equivalent to one year's wage at the end of the court process. Consequently, the number of union members in the factory approached 190 within two weeks, bringing the union very close to reaching the necessary threshold to apply for official recognition from the ministry.

For the factory management, which had been attempting to prevent unionization through dismissals and verbal threats, this situation signaled a serious threat. The management realized the need to reconsider its strategy against union activities and began to respond by easing the repressive atmosphere within the factory, making significant concessions, and attempting to deepen divisions among the workers. Before addressing the countermeasures taken by the management, it is important to examine the unionization efforts of the Syrian workers under TPS, both as members of the workplace committee and as participants in the symbolic resistance at the factory gate. This occurred during a period of rising anti-immigrant sentiment in Turkey, described as the "hottest summer for migrants." Understanding the limited but symbolic historicity of this exceptional collabouration between citizen and Syrian workers under TPS at the AKBL Factory will shed light on the broader implications of their united struggle.

5.5 Organizing in the hottest summer of migrants

"It would be better if they didn't talk so much politics."
(Engin, 30, Vatandaş İşçi, Erkek)

Before delving into the events of 10 August, when the open confrontation between the union and workplace management began and the resistance at the factory front commenced, it is essential to evaluate the political and social context in which the union organization took place and the tensions that shaped union practices during this period. The re-establishment of workplace committees and the resumption of unionization efforts at the AKBL Factory occurred during a particularly chaotic period in Turkey's political history, characterized by a significant rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, which increasingly manifested in collective acts of violence.

This period saw a marked increase in xenophobic rhetoric, notably from figures like Tanju Özcan, the mayor of Bolu, who amplified his hate speech against Syrians via social media. Özcan controversially announced that prices for water and other municipal services would be ten times higher for foreigners than for citizens, explicitly stating, "Why? Because we want them to leave" (Euronews, 2021). Such statements reflect the broader societal tensions that had been building since the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011, which had periodically escalated anti-immigrant sentiment in Turkey. These tensions often peaked following events such as the deaths of Turkish soldiers during cross-border operations in Syria, crimes allegedly committed by immigrants, or the circulation of images depicting large numbers of asylum-seekers within Turkey.

By 2018, these anti-immigrant attitudes were further exacerbated by Turkey's deepening economic crisis, which was later intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and economic vulnerabilities became more pronounced (Orhangazi & Yeldan, 2021),

and public opinion research began to identify migrants as one of the country's principal problems (Aydın et al., 2022). The rise in anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments (Esses & Hamilton, 2021: 255) amid growing economic uncertainty, precariousness, and increasing authoritarianism, mirrors trends observed in other countries experiencing similar socio-economic pressures. The post-2018 period in Turkey, which can be termed a "supra-precarization period," was characterized by soaring prices for food, energy, and housing, the erosion of labour value, and distributional shocks caused by the declining share of labour in national income (Orhangazi & Yeldan, 2023: 173-174). These developments, coupled with the weakened organizational and political capacity of the working class under an increasingly authoritarian regime, allowed political actors who prioritized anti-immigrant sentiment to move into the mainstream, making this sentiment one of the central issues in Turkish politics.

The most significant event in terms of anti-immigrant sentiment during the summer of 2021—referred to as "the hottest summer for migrants"—was the Altındağ attacks. On 10 August 2021, in the Altındağ district of Ankara, a violent confrontation between Syrian and Turkish youths escalated after a Turkish citizen was fatally stabbed, leading to a mass lynching against Syrian refugees. The homes and businesses of Syrian refugees were looted. According to the Ankara Police Department, 148 people involved in the violence were detained, and official statements revealed that 64 of those arrested had prior records for crimes such as extortion, theft, assault, and drug manufacturing (Öztürk, 2021). The violence against Syrian refugees in Altındağ significantly intensified anti-immigrant sentiment in Turkey, making migration issues once again a focal point of national politics.

It is also noteworthy that Ümit Özdağ, a central figure in Turkey's anti-immigrant politics, who consistently framed Syrian refugees and irregular migration as the primary sources of Turkey's problems—especially on social media—and who frequently linked refugees to crime and security issues (Deniz & Kargın, 2023), founded the Zafer Party two weeks after the Altındağ attacks. This party, which would later become the epicentre of anti-immigrant politics in Turkey, founded at a time when DİSK Tekstil was trying to organise both citizen and Syrian workers under TPS under the same trade union umbrella. This political backdrop adds a layer of complexity to the union's efforts, highlighting the broader social tensions and challenges that influenced the dynamics of labour organizing during this period.

We inquired with both unionists and citizen workers about how the rising anti-immigrant atmosphere in the country, as summarized above, affected the unionization efforts within the factory. Ahmet, the Regional Representative of the union, provided insight into the process

> "At that time, the racist statements by the mayor of Bolu regarding Syrians were prominent in the news. As these discussions unfolded, our work at AKBL was ongoing, and then the events in Altındağ occurred. We were already holding weekly meetings with the workers; it was a period of intense organization. Every day there were new developments in the factory, and we were constantly meeting with the workers. Syrian workers also participated in most of these meetings. In one meeting with around 50 workers, at least a third of whom were Syrian, I specifically raised the Altındağ incident as a topic. I asked, 'Such things are happening in the country, what do you think?' and 'You work and live together here, have there been any tensions between you?' Workers generally avoid discussing such topics, especially in mixed groups. Syrians' reluctance is understandable, but Turkish workers also tend to avoid these discussions in the presence of Syrians. However, we were persistent in encouraging them to talk about these issues because we believe that as they talk together, they will begin to understand each other and feel more at ease. Eventually, they started to open up. We emphasized that this organization would be exemplary, that the unionization of Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab workers together would set an example for the entire working class, and that workers should unite against such distinctions. We repeatedly discussed that just as the boss does not discriminate between Syrian and

> Turkish workers when exploiting them, the workers should not discriminate when they struggle together." (Ahmet, Regional Representative of the Trade Union, Male)

Engaging in political discussions with workers of diverse political ideologies, identities, and affiliations during unionization efforts—especially on topics that could create immediate divisions and tensions—can be risky in terms of the short-term goals of union organization. It is understandable for a union to focus on 'safe' topics like working conditions and labour processes, which cut across different political and ethnic identities and are relatively easier to organize around, rather than delving into highly charged topics like anti-immigrant sentiment. However, all three trade unionists we interviewed during the field research emphasized that economic struggle and political-ideological struggle cannot be separated. The DİSK Textile Union, particularly in its activities at the AKBL Factory, adheres to a model of class unionism (Uçkan, 2004) that asserts the necessity of waging political and ideological struggle alongside raising the economic and social demands of workers.

In Turkey, since the coup of 12 September 1980, the tradition of class unionism—wherein workers engage in political and ideological struggle in addition to economic and social struggles—has weakened, and the organizational and political capacity of working-class organizations, particularly trade unions and left-socialist political parties, has declined. In a political climate of rising anti-immigrant sentiment, which transcends different social classes and quickly mobilizes society around a common "other," the decision by trade unionists to "risk involving politics" can be viewed as a significant practice of class trade unionism.

Encouraging workers to discuss anti-immigrant sentiments, the racist and xenophobic rhetoric of politicians, and the provocations and attacks against immigrants, thereby integrating these issues into the unionization process, aligns

with what Hyman describes as the role of unions as schools where the struggles between labour and capital are taught (2001:2). This process helps workers involved in unionization to dismantle the ideological constructs that obscure the true causes of their problems and to discover effective methods of struggle. For instance, when we asked Hasan, a citizen worker interviewed during this research, about his relationship with Syrian refugees and how their presence in the city and labour market affected him, he responded: "While I was earning 430 liras per week, Syrians started working for 250 liras, and wages dropped, of course. Why would the boss pay us more when they have people willing to work for less? They have no voice, no say, so the boss hires two of them for the same amount", and he added:

> "All the uninsured jobs went to Syrians. But I got insured after they arrived. Nowadays, not many people from Antep work without being registered; they're mostly Syrians. We used to be at the back of the line, but when they came and took our place, we moved a bit forward. At that time, they were seen as temporary workers, but now they're not like that. They were more transient before, moving in and out of jobs, but now they've settled down. They've gained self-confidence; they no longer see themselves as temporary. There's no going back for them now." (Hasan, 40, Citizen Worker, Male)

This reflection illustrates the complex dynamics at play in the workplace and how the integration of political and social discussions into union activities can help workers contextualize their experiences and build solidarity across different identities.

Carpio and Wagner's (2015) claim that for every 10 Syrians working informally, 3 citizen workers are able to find formal jobs is exemplified by Hasan, a worker in the 'school of struggle', who states that there is a direct relationship between the influx of Syrians into the informal sector and his own transition to a formal, insured job. Hasan's observation on the transfer of informal jobs to migrants underscores the role of a trade unionism approach that integrates economic-social

struggle with political-ideological struggle, enabling workers to make such connections.

Yusuf, union expert, highlighted that the inclusion of migration issues in union meetings, particularly the explanation that hostility toward migrants ultimately benefits employers, has strengthened the trust and loyalty of Syrian workers towards the union:

> "Syrians are constantly discriminated against and mistreated in official settings, so they were deeply moved by a trade union that stood up for them and said, 'We are with you.' They have their associations, but they viewed us as an official institution, almost like a state entity. Citizen workers, on the other hand, were often skeptical of the union, suspecting ulterior motives, but Syrian workers were very trusting. Many had never encountered a union before. This trust was also built through our discussions about class solidarity. We emphasized that just as the boss does not discriminate between Syrian and Turkish workers when exploiting them, we should fight together without discrimination when we struggle. We discussed the impact of Syrians in Turkey, the fall in wages, the rise in rents, and the real reasons behind these issues. As these discussions progressed, Syrian workers' trust in us deepened significantly." (Yusuf, Trade Union Expert, Male)

It was emphasised by our citizen worker interviewees that the 'men' of the factory management told the citizen workers that 'there are a lot of hungry Syrians out there, don't be stupid, don't lose your job' during the interviews in line with the deunionization strategy. On the other hand, as the accountant told Syrian worker under TPS Mehmet, provoking citizens was one of the accusations used against Syrians active in the trade union process. Despite the favourable structural environment for exploiting ethnic divisions—created by the rising anti-immigrant sentiment across the country and the vulnerabilities exposed by Turkish capitalism—the AKBL Factory management could not openly exploit these divisions during the deunionization process. Nor were they able to leverage hostility towards immigrants as a divisive and organizing tool against the unionization efforts. This restraint may have been influenced by several factors. Firstly, the factory management might have

recognized that overtly exploiting ethnic divisions could backfire, potentially strengthening solidarity among workers who would otherwise resist such manipulation. Secondly, the presence of labour organizers who actively worked to bridge these divisions—by emphasizing class solidarity and common interests—may have mitigated the effectiveness of any attempts to sow discord along ethnic lines.

Additionally, the fact that the unionization effort included both citizen and Syrian workers, with significant participation from the latter, likely made it more difficult for the management to successfully deploy divisive tactics based on ethnicity. The union's inclusive approach, which focused on collective labour rights rather than ethnic or national identities, created a counter-narrative that resisted the broader societal trends of anti-immigrant sentiment.

In essence, while the broader social and economic conditions in Turkey might have provided an environment conducive to exploiting ethnic tensions, the specific dynamics within the AKBL Factory—shaped by the actions of both the management and the union—prevented these tensions from becoming a central factor in the deunionizationprocess. This outcome underscores the potential for labour movements to transcend divisive societal trends, even in challenging circumstances, through strategic organization and an emphasis on solidarity across differences. The unionists' frequent engagement with anti-immigrant discourse in the broader political and social context, while constructing collective interests (Kelly, 2002) and common demands, played a crucial role in fostering unity among workers and reinforcing the loyalty and trust of Syrian workers in the union. This approach was so effective that Syrian refugees were among the last to abandon their union memberships when the unionization process ultimately succumbed to factory management's tactics. Engin, a

citizen worker employed at the AKBL factory since 2013, expressed the Syrian workers' sentiments towards the union:

> "Incidents like the one in Altındağ also happened in Antep. People were justified in their concerns then; for example, in 2014, a boy was raped, and the neighborhood was raided. At that time, people were mainly concerned with protecting their own order. There was no trust on the street; you didn't know who people were or what they were about. Even when you worked together, you didn't know much about each other. The union provided an opportunity to connect. Since the people in the union trusted each other, there were no issues due to the outside events—like those in Altındağ. The union was the place where Syrians could feel most at ease. There was little discrimination." (Engin, 30, Citizen Worker, Male)

This sentiment reflects the union's success in creating an inclusive environment where workers, regardless of their background, could unite and resist the divisive forces present both within and outside the factory. The union's emphasis on solidarity and mutual support fostered a sense of community among Syrian workers, making the union a rare space of safety and equality amidst widespread discrimination.

The unionists' approach of "getting politics involved" in the unionization process at the AKBL Factory does present several significant disadvantages. Chief among these is the alienation of workers with differing political affiliations, particularly when union meetings extend discussions from workplace-specific issues, such as working conditions and wages, to more contentious topics like immigration, the Kurdish question, and broader issues of democratization. These discussions can create fertile ground for counter-propaganda by workplace management and the "boss's men" among union members. Hakan, a prominent figure in the unionization process who has worked at the AKBL Factory since 2010, expressed concerns about this approach:

> "They overdid it in terms of talking on politics. Ahmet (the regional representative) emphasized the leftist view a lot. There are many AKP and

> MHP members in the factory. The right-wing people wouldn't speak badly about Ahmet after the meetings, but they would say that not everything he said was true. We specifically told the union, 'Let's not get into PKK issue.' We said, 'Let's fight for labour, not for politics.' Politics distances workers from each other. It should unite them, but it doesn't. Then, immediately there were rumours and gossip in the factory that the trade unionists were already extreme leftists and supporters of HDP. People don't believe it, of course. But even those who don't believe are afraid in the end." (Hakan, 37, Citizen Worker, Male)

The increasing authoritarianism in Turkey since the mid-2010s (Bozkurt-Güngen, 2018) has fostered a political climate where the working-class movement is frequently associated with terrorism and marginalization, aligning with broader strategies of de-unionization. This authoritarian climate effectively creates conditions that support deunionization efforts by fostering distrust and fear among workers, particularly when union activities are framed as politically subversive. Since 2015, a new threshold of authoritarian statism has been crossed (Arslanalp & Erkmen, 2020), evidenced by the banning of 10 major strikes between 2015 and 2020 on the grounds of being "disruptive to general health and national security," thereby denying more than 170,000 workers their right to strike (DİSK-AR, 2020).

During this period, even routine union activities conducted by left-leaning labour organizations within legal limits could be easily marginalized, as seen in the AKBL Factory case. There has been a marked increase in the forceful intervention of law enforcement in working-class mobilizations (Birelma et al., 2022: 1890). A particularly stark example of this repression was the labour struggle at the construction of Istanbul's Third Airport. On 12 September 2018, after a shuttle bus crash injured 17 workers, workers protested against labour deaths and the harsh working conditions at the airport. The response of the government was unprecedentedly severe: police and gendarmerie forces raided workers' dormitories early in the morning, detaining over 3,200 workers within 15-20 days (Avcı, 2020).

Thirty-one people, including trade unionists, were arrested, and a total of 61 people were charged with various offenses, including “resisting to prevent the execution of duty,” “violation of freedom of work and labour,” and “damaging public property” (Sessiz Kalma, 2019).

Throughout these events, the mainstream media, which has strong political and commercial ties to the ruling party, portrayed the protesting workers as terrorists and depicted their resistance as a provocation against the government (Livberber, 2019: 134). This pattern of criminalizing working-class mobilizations is not unique to the AKP period or to specific events like the Third Airport workers' resistance. With the relative exception of the military coup period from 27 May and to September, the repression of the working-class movement in Turkey has been consistent in its nature, though varying in intensity and methods. The period after 2015 represents a continuation, rather than a break, in the historical trend of repression against the working-class movement (Birelma et al., 2022: 1864).

This continuity of repression is also evident when recalling the 1996 Ünaldı weaving workers' strike, the most significant strike in the history of the working class in Gaziantep. During that strike, leading workers were labeled as “terrorists” by employers (Karadaş, 2011: 198), and the Governor of Gaziantep at the time declared, "Security forces are on duty; necessary actions will be taken against those who politicize the incident" (ibid. 211). Thus, the history of the working-class movement in Turkey is inextricably linked with a history of authoritarianism and repression, where state and employer forces have consistently sought to undermine labour solidarity by framing it as a political and security threat.

5.6 The management of the factory is launching an offensive: Breaking the organization and end of the story

The management of the AKBL Factory initially attempted to instill fear among the workers and intimidate them through a strategy of individual dismissals, a tactic commonly employed by employers aiming to deunionize their workforce (Roy, 1980). The dismissal of Hakan, a well-liked and respected worker, under the pretext of damaging machinery, served to create both solidarity and fear among the workers. Salih, a Syrian worker under Temporary Protection Status (TPS) who has been employed at the AKBL Factory since 2016, provided insight into the atmosphere created by these dismissals:

> "After Hakan was dismissed, he began to stand in front of the factory. The managers placed a camera right in front of that area. They told us, 'Those who go near Hakan, those who greet him, will start to be persecuted at the workplace.' Hakan was a very decent person. Every war has a martyr. In ours, it was Hakan. They threw him out to intimidate the people inside, and it worked. For example, we were going to cut plastic bags—just nylon, a worthless bag. My mate said, 'I can't cut it.' When I asked why, he said, 'Cameras are recording us. They'll fire us without compensation for damaging factory property by shredding the bag.' People were so intimidated. Some were saying, 'If we leave here, we won't be able to find a job.' I used to get angry with them. It's the same job here and outside. The same God provides for us both here and outside. Let us trust ourselves. Let us trust in our God." (Salih, 46, Syrian Worker under TPS, Male)

Salih's account reveals that, in addition to the dismissals, the workplace management employed other threats to maintain control. One significant threat involved the use of mobbing and worsening working conditions, with the warning that "those who go to Hakan will start to be tortured." Consistent with Roy's concept of the "fear stuff" approach in non-union strategies, the AKBL Factory management also interrogated workers suspected of union affiliation, as was the case with Mehmet, another Syrian worker under TPS. The management attempted to manipulate workers by claiming that the union was illegal and warning them that "besides losing your job, you'll get

into trouble with the police." This strategy extended beyond management personnel; the factory also involved supervisors, managers, and even non-union workers, tasking them with persuading their colleagues to abandon unionization efforts. Engin, a citizen worker and union member, described the role of these workers in the deunionizationefforts:

> "One of them is a cook, another is a driver, and another has been with the company for 25 years—all of them are the boss's lackeys. We used to see them as decent people, but we recognized them for what they are through this incident. They would go to our friends and supposedly advise them. They'd say, 'Don't get into trouble, don't trust the union, they've let people down before.' They sent these same people to Hakan after the resistance started. They told him, 'Don't burn your compensation; you won't find another job elsewhere. Don't be manipulated by the union.' Neither Hakan nor the union accepted the bargain." (Engin, 30, Citizen Worker, Male)

These testimonies illustrate the multifaceted approach taken by AKBL Factory management to disrupt the unionization process. By combining direct threats, psychological manipulation, and the involvement of certain workers in their deunionizationstrategy, the management sought to create an environment of fear and uncertainty, making it difficult for union efforts to gain traction. Despite these efforts, the workers' solidarity, particularly in the face of such intimidation, underscores the resilience of their collective struggle against a deeply entrenched system of control.

Despite the concerted efforts by the AKBL Factory management to suppress unionization through fear and intimidation, these strategies ultimately proved insufficient. Following Hakan's dismissal, the union firmly established its presence at the factory gate by setting up a resistance area. Workers, undeterred by management's prohibitions, visited this area during breaks and at the beginning and end of their shifts. The union leadership also made a strong stand in support of Mehmet, the Syrian worker under Temporary Protection Status (TPS) who had been

dismissed. These actions contributed to a growing sense of determination and self-confidence among the workers, signaling that the unionization effort was gaining momentum.

It's important to note that in Turkey, employers do not have the legal right to access information about union members in the workplace unless a collective bargaining agreement is in place. This allows unionization efforts to be conducted covertly to a certain extent. As management observed the increasing momentum of unionization and the rising self-assurance among workers, they realized that their initial tactics were failing.

In response, the AKBL Factory management made a strategic shift in the second half of August. Moving away from their initial approach of fear and intimidation, they began to implement a more comprehensive deunionization strategy focused on by-passing the union (Gall, 2001) and union substitution (Roy, 1980).

The by-passing approach involved management organizing spontaneous or planned individual and collective meetings where workers could voice their concerns. During these meetings, management increased direct communication with workers, gave the impression that they were listening to their grievances, and promised to address their issues, all in an effort to bypass the union (Gall, 2004: 46-47). Salih, a Syrian worker under TPS who had been with the factory since 2016, described this process:

> "One evening after work, we got on the shuttle bus, and the manager's men came and dropped us off. They told us to go to the dining hall and wait. We went to the dining hall, and then the boss came. We were quite surprised to see him. He said, 'What happened, guys? What is your problem? What do you want? Tell me directly, and we will do whatever we can.' A few friends complained about the supervisors, saying, 'They are causing us a lot of trouble, doing bad things to us.' If they see you take out your phone, they immediately write a report and fine you. Others said, 'There's no tea or coffee at night. What are we supposed to do until morning?' We saw that the boss was listening to us, and his men were writing down what we said. He listened

> to us like a human being. This time we all started talking together. 'The food is bad, there's no cold water; we have to bring ice from home,' we said. The boss treated us with respect and listened to us for a long time. Then he said, 'Come to me with these issues, and we will solve them. Otherwise, nothing will get resolved. We will take some time, but we will address them all.'" (Salih, 46, Syrian Worker under TPS, Male)

In addition to these meetings, management continued to interrogate workers individually, focusing particularly on those experiencing significant financial difficulties. They held separate meetings with these workers, offering financial assistance or other benefits in exchange for information about union activities. Turgut, a citizen worker, recounted this tactic:

> "Management started interviewing workers one by one. Some were offered money; others were promised promotions to supervisorship. The same people who would go to great lengths to avoid paying an extra 3 liras suddenly started throwing money around to keep the union out. They found out that Haktan owed 500 liras. We later learned that Haktan took the money and gave them the names of who was and wasn't in the union." (Turgut, 38, Citizen Worker, Male)

These strategies reflect a more sophisticated attempt by the AKBL Factory management to undermine the unionization effort by creating divisions among workers and attempting to substitute direct engagement with management for union representation. By doing so, they sought to erode the solidarity that had been building among the workers and to dismantle the union's influence within the factory.

Yusuf, the union expert, observed that during the meetings organized by workplace management, the management attempted to persuade workers by saying, "Let's solve whatever problems you have. Don't let yourselves be used by those guys (unionists); you don't even know them. If you want a union, let's bring our own union here." This approach, as defined by Gall (2001) as "tame stuff," represents a non-union strategy where management promises to bring in a "moderate" union that is

more acceptable to the employer, rather than allowing a perceived threat like the DİSK Textile Union to take root. The factory management reinforced this strategy by propagating the idea that the existing union was "far left" and "associated with terrorism." However, despite these promises, no alternative union, either employer-backed or spontaneously organized, actually engaged in unionization efforts at the AKBL Factory. At the same time, the factory management attempted to weaken the momentum of the trade union movement by placing workers identified as the vanguard of the movement on unpaid leave. This tactic was employed by the employer to disrupt the bonds between these leading workers and the rest of the workforce, effectively removing the vanguard workers from the factory environment. Barış, one of the key figures in the unionization effort, described this strategy as follows:

> "After these talks started, they sent us, those who formed workplace committees, on unpaid leave. The season is not over, there is still work, they tell us 'you are going on leave.' First, we consulted with the union. We learned about our legal rights and discussed what steps we should take. Then we confronted the management and objected, saying, 'You have no right to send us on leave one after the other like this.' They called us back, made us work for two weeks, and then sent us on leave again. How is a man who works two-three weeks a month supposed to support a household?" (Barış, 44, Citizen Worker, Male)

Barış's account reveals the calculated nature of the management's efforts to undermine the unionization process. By selectively placing the movement's leaders on unpaid leave, the employer sought to destabilize their influence and create financial strain, thereby attempting to diminish their resolve and weaken the overall union effort. This tactic highlights the broader strategy of using economic pressure to deter collective action and maintain control over the workforce.

The second major step in the management's deunionization strategy, consistent with the union substitution approach (Roy, 1980), involved addressing the

very demands that had been raised by the union to gain support among the workers. Earlier in this chapter, we categorized the union's key demands into four main areas: wage increases, the institution of Saturday as a weekly holiday, a reduction in the repressive environment within the factory, and the provision of quality food and water. Management's response, particularly in the latter two categories, was notably radical for the AKBL Factory.

Before the union struggle, workers were entitled to only 250 ml of drinking water per meal, and requests for additional water were met with the response, "Your right has expired." In response to the union's organizing efforts, management first abolished the water limit, allowing workers to have unlimited and free access to water during meals. The following week, tea and coffee machines were also made available to the workers. Furthermore, management lifted two major prohibitions in the production area: the bans on food and wearing slippers. Additionally, the presence and harsh attitudes of security supervisors during breaks diminished significantly.

By reducing control and pressure on the workers and making these concessions, the management aimed to weaken the workers' perceived need for a union (Roy, 1980: 405-408). Just as the workers, who had previously needed a doctor's certificate to wear slippers, found physical relief after the ban was lifted, their resolve to organize against the employer also softened. According to Hodson's analysis of the relationship between workplace oppression and worker solidarity (2001: 213), the concessions made at the AKBL Factory, while not eliminating worker oppression entirely, did reduce it sufficiently to undermine the solidarity that had been building during the unionization process. Mehmet, a Syrian worker under TPS, described the impact of these changes on the factory environment:

> "Before, we were entitled to 1 small liter of water at meals. When the union started, they began giving us half a liter of water. I sometimes took two bottles, and no one said anything. Then water dispensers were installed. After I was dismissed, a tea machine was also installed. So, the factory became a more tolerable place to work. Security wasn't around much anymore, and they left people alone." (Mehmet, Syrian Worker under TPS, Male)

The union and its leading workers struggled to effectively counter these deunionizationstrategies implemented by management. In response to the concessions, unionists attempted to maintain morale by claiming, "So many gains have been achieved without unionization yet; the employer made these concessions because he feared the union's entry. Imagine what will happen after unionization." They tried to inspire workers with the prospect of even greater victories. However, this rhetoric was not sufficient to rebuild the weakened and loosened solidarity among the workers.

At this critical juncture, the workplace management made a decisive move to end the unionization efforts: they offered cash money to workers who could prove they were not union members. Additionally, they informed workers with accumulated compensation that they could either leave the job with their compensation and return to work by proving they were not union members if they want. This final tactic effectively undermined the unionization drive, exploiting the workers' financial vulnerabilities and breaking the momentum that had been building among the workforce.

In Turkey, workers have the ability to join or resign from a union through an online citizenship portal. The management at the AKBL Factory exploited this system by offering 200 liras in cash to workers who provided their user-specific passwords, effectively proving that they were not union members or had resigned

from the union. Salih, a Syrian worker under Temporary Protection Status (TPS), shared his thoughts on this process:

> "They sold themselves for 200 liras. These are supposedly union members. The man comes out of lunch and goes straight to the accountant's room. He shamelessly queues there and waits. When it's his turn, he gives his password, they enter it into the computer, they check it, and then he takes 200 liras in hand. Nowadays this money is nothing, but it was good then. At that time, it was equivalent to two days' wages. But would anyone sell themselves for money? Ahmet (the Regional Representative of the Trade Union) made a lot of effort for these men, tried to help them a lot, fought for them, but our men turned out to be bad." (Salih, 47, Syrian Worker under TPS, Male)

However, the pivotal concession that ultimately ended the entire unionization process was the decision by the AKBL Factory, which had a notorious reputation in the city for not paying severance, to offer all workers the right to take their compensation and quit their jobs. Additionally, those workers who wished to return to work were given the option to do so after receiving their accumulated compensation, on the condition that they shared their e-government passwords, thereby proving they were no longer union members. Ahmet, the union regional representative who led the organizing efforts and was a trusted leader among the workers, described how the unionization effort unravelled:

> "The main breaking point was this: The unionized workers inside took their compensation and started to leave, and they didn't inform us. The boss realized that he couldn't cope with the organization, so he said, 'We will give all the workers their severance pay and let them go; we will take back whoever we want without a union.' When the workers heard about the compensation, they took it and left without informing us, without informing the committee. Some of them didn't want to work there anyway, and we couldn't convince them; some of them broke direct communication with us. More than half of our over 180 members took their compensation and left work in a short time. When the pioneering workers in the committee did this, other resignations started to come. The committee itself succeeded where the boss had failed. We were telling them, 'Stay in the committee; if you take your compensation now, you'll get it at the minimum wage, but wait another month until the collective bargaining agreement is concluded. Wait another month; let's get organized with the 20 people left. Let's come in, and then you'll get double the compensation.' But it was not effective. Because AKBL is a factory that has ever given compensation in its history. People were

> surprised; most of them took the compensation while they could get it. So even the most determined workers gave up." (Ahmet, Regional Representative of the Trade Union, Male)

The unionization process at the AKBL Factory unraveled as the management strategically reduced the repressive environment within the workplace, allowing workers to wear slippers, offering unlimited drinking water, and providing tea and food vending machines. These changes were followed by an unprecedented move: the management offered cash payments to workers in exchange for their e-government passwords, which allowed them to verify whether the workers were union members. Subsequently, management dismissed all workers but offered them their severance pay, with the option to be re-hired if they could prove they were no longer union members.

Despite the unionists' efforts to prevent the dissolution of the union through meetings and appeals to solidarity, the process could not be halted. Many workers, particularly those who were part of the committee leading the unionization effort, accepted their compensation and left their jobs. Almost half of the citizen workers who were union members took their severance pay, resigned from the union, and some of the pioneering workers severed all communication with the union. Barış, one of the pioneer citizen workers, explained that the decision to take severance pay and quit was driven by a sense of shame and resignation:

> "Everyone has received their compensation. They know that when the union is finished, everything will go back to the way it was in the factory. Of course, some people took the compensation. I didn't answer the phone calls from the union for a while. I spoke to Ahmet afterward. I feel ashamed. He worked so hard for us. He said, 'Why didn't you resist? Why did you take your compensation and quit, Barış?', 'I was the only one left; everyone else took it. What could I do?' I said sheepishly. 'Would I leave you alone? Wouldn't I be with you financially and morally even if I was all alone?' he asked. 'You would,' I said. But I couldn't say anything more." (Barış, 44, Citizen Worker, Male)

Barış's account highlights the emotional and psychological toll that the management's tactics took on the workers. The combination of financial incentives and the breakdown of solidarity led even the most committed union members to give up, feeling isolated and ashamed. The management's strategy effectively dismantled the unionization effort by exploiting workers' vulnerabilities, creating a sense of inevitability about the failure of the movement, and undermining the trust and unity that had been painstakingly built.

5.7. Loyalty to trade union until the last moment: Syrian workers under TPS in a united struggle

By the end of August, the management at the AKBL Factory successfully dismantled the unionization effort through a combination of by-passing strategies (Gall, 2001) and union substitution tactics (Roy, 1980). These strategies effectively weakened labour solidarity and the bond between workers and the union. Management achieved this by offering workers financial incentives, first in the form of cash, then compensation, and finally the option to return to work after resigning from the union. This marked the end of what was an exceptional unionization attempt, particularly notable for the active involvement of Syrian workers under Temporary Protection Status (TPS), who made up half of the workplace committee and played a significant role in the resistance process.

One of the striking aspects of the AKBL Factory experience is that the citizen workers resigned from the union earlier than the Syrian workers under TPS. Out of the 25 Syrian workers employed at the factory, 24 became union members during this process. Despite the management's efforts, only 4 Syrian workers resigned from

the union, while the remaining Syrian workers stayed with the union until the very end. There are likely two main reasons for this.

Firstly, the union's consistent anti-immigrant stance and emphasis on class brotherhood throughout the organizing process created a sense of safety and solidarity among the Syrian workers. The union regularly addressed issues related to unemployment and high housing rents, and repeatedly emphasized that immigrants were not to blame for these problems. This inclusive approach helped make the union a trusted space for Syrians. As Mehmet, a Syrian worker under TPS, explained:

> "What is a union? It helps you if you get sacked. The lawyer is free. You can go to court for free. Why shouldn't I join? The man (Ahmet) tells you to defend your rights. In the union, Syrians, unemployment, rents were discussed, but there were no Turks, Kurds, or Syrians in the union. Ahmet was saying that we all have the same cause, labour. We are all going through the same thing. There are bad people among the workers, there are. Wherever you go, there are good and bad people. But the bosses are all sons of bitches. Especially ours, the biggest son of a bitch. I gained good people in the union. Ahmet is more important to me than money." (Mehmet, 25, Syrian Worker under TPS, Male)

The loyalty of Syrian workers to the union and unionists, rather than to the citizen workers with whom they had limited relationships before unionization, is evident from their actions and statements. The fact that Syrians resigned much later than citizen workers supports this observation. Salih, a 46-year-old Syrian worker under TPS, articulated this sentiment:

> "I cannot lie to you. I know that they are cowards (referring to citizen workers). We asked for a raise long before the union came, and no one stood by us. Are they going to win? I didn't believe that the union would succeed because I didn't believe in these people. I said these people couldn't do it. But Ahmet is a decent man, a different man. If he could do it, he would. I believed in him. But our workers are naughty." (Salih, 46, Syrian Worker under TPS, Male)

This reflection underscores the unique bond that Syrian workers developed with the union and its leaders, particularly Ahmet. Their loyalty was rooted in the trust and respect they had for the union leadership, which they perceived as genuinely committed to advocating for their rights and interests. This bond between the Syrian workers and the union leadership was a critical factor in sustaining their commitment to the union, even when other workers began to withdraw. T As a result, the Syrian workers felt a stronger connection to the union and its leaders than to their citizen counterparts, who they viewed with skepticism due to past experiences of lack of support. This dynamic illustrates the importance of trust and effective leadership in labour organizing, particularly in diverse and challenging environments. The experience at the AKBL Factory, therefore, highlights not only the challenges of building cross-cultural solidarity in labour movements but also the potential for unions to bridge these divides through principled leadership and inclusive practices.

The observation that Syrian workers under Temporary Protection Status (TPS) resigned from the union later than their citizen counterparts can be attributed to several factors. One key reason is that, due to their shorter tenure as registered employees at the AKBL Factory, the severance compensation they would receive was significantly less. This likely influenced their decision to remain in the union, hoping for better outcomes from the successful completion of the unionization process rather than accepting a smaller compensation payout and quitting. However, it's important to note that despite this rationale, many short-term citizen workers still chose to take their compensation and leave.

The DİSK Textile Union managed to forge a short-lived but meaningful alliance between Syrian and citizen workers. This unionization effort saw Syrian workers under TPS actively participating in the organization and advocating for the

rights of their citizen colleagues, thereby fostering a mutual sympathy and solidarity between the two groups. The involvement of Syrians in the unionization process brought about a notable change in the workplace dynamics. The attitudes of both citizen workers and supervisors towards Syrian workers shifted, leading to a sense of equality that had previously been absent. Barış, a citizen worker, described this shift in workplace relations:

> "It used to happen before. For example, how did it happen? When one of our colleagues got tired, he would say to the supervisor 'move me.' The supervisor would replace him with a Syrian worker who did less strenuous work. Especially Syrians who couldn't speak to the masters, who didn't speak the language, were forced to move. The women used this situation a bit. Syrians who had a language were defending themselves somehow, claiming their rights. But those who didn't speak the Turkish were victimized. They were being relocated. Supervisors and masters used to favor us against the Syrians. After the union started, we ended this relocation. How can I put it? It's a shame. We equalized ourselves there. But the supervisors also equalized us. Recently they have not been pushing the Syrians so hard; they said, 'these people are organizing.' The ones who spoke well, especially the ones who were vigilant, they were pushing them less." (Barış, 40, Citizen Worker, Male)

This account illustrates how the union's efforts not only challenged the hierarchical dynamics within the factory but also cultivated a sense of shared struggle between Syrian and citizen workers. The newfound solidarity was reflected in the way workers perceived and treated each other, as well as in the changed attitudes of supervisors, who began to see Syrians as more formidable and organized.

The resilience of the Syrian workers during this period is a particularly noteworthy aspect of the AKBL Factory experience. In interviews with both citizen workers and unionists, a recurring theme was the strength and determination of the Syrian workers, especially in the face of financial and social pressures. Several participants used nearly identical language to describe this phenomenon:

> "Syrians stood firm; they endured more than us even in the last money issue." (Hasan, 40, Citizen Worker, Male)
>
> "Our people took their money and started to leave the union and the factory, but the Syrians stood firmer than we did." (Engin, 30, Citizen Worker, Male)
>
> "I never saw anything bad from my Syrian friends. They did not look at me badly. In the trade union business, they stood firm while our men took their money and left." (Ece, 30, Citizen Worker, Female)
>
> "During the resignation process, 4 Syrian workers resigned, while more than half of the Turkish workers resigned. In the face of such pressures, Syrians stood more firm than Turks and Kurds. They resisted more. This is important for this. For example, the boss was threatening Syrian workers like this. Registered work is only possible with the application of the boss. In other words, a Syrian worker's right to registered work, to insured work, is completely at the mercy of the boss. This is something that leaves Syrians helpless. Finding an insured job, registered work under these conditions is an extraordinary thing for a Syrian worker. This is not the case for a Turkish worker; they can find a job more easily elsewhere, they can go and file a lawsuit, they can claim their rights, but for Syrian workers these things are not available. Despite such a risk, it was great that they fought to the end with their fellow citizen workers at the risk of losing this, and that they did not quit even after they did." (Ahmet, Trade Union Regional Representative, Male)

These reflections underscore the remarkable fortitude of the Syrian workers, who, despite facing greater risks and having fewer resources at their disposal, demonstrated significant loyalty and resilience in the unionization struggle. Their willingness to stand firm, even as many of their citizen counterparts chose to accept compensation and leave, highlights the depth of their commitment to the cause and the profound impact of the union's inclusive approach. The AKBL Factory experience, while ultimately a story of a defeated unionization effort, remains a powerful example of how solidarity between citizen and Syrian workers under TPS can be built, even in the most challenging of circumstances.

CHAPTER 6

LEGACY OF THE STRUGGLE AND TODAY'S PICTURE

6.1 After the unionisation experience: Struggle legacy and lessons learned

The management of the AKBL Factory initially sought to prevent unionization by instilling fear among the workers through individual dismissals. When this approach proved insufficient, they adopted a more comprehensive deunionizationstrategy, incorporating both by-passing (Gall, 2001) and union substitution (Roy, 1980) tactics. To implement this strategy, the management organized meetings where workers were encouraged to voice their concerns, thereby creating an illusion of responsiveness. They also eased workplace pressures by addressing specific demands, such as providing unlimited drinking water and allowing workers to wear slippers. Furthermore, management offered cash payments to workers who could prove they were not union members and ultimately allowed workers to quit with their indemnities, with the option to return to work on the condition that they were not affiliated with a union. This multifaceted approach successfully dismantled the unionization process initiated by the DİSK Textile Union, which had gained nearly 190 members over more than two months.

This exceptional unionization effort at the AKBL Factory, in which 24 of the 25 Syrian workers formally employed were union members and six Syrian workers were directly involved in the workplace committee organizing the union, ultimately ended when Hakan, a dismissed citizen worker, and Mehmet, a Syrian worker under Temporary Protection Status (TPS), concluded their resistance in front of the factory. Syrian worker Mehmet summarized their resistance as follows:

> "We resisted together in front of the factory for 20 days. Hakan used to pick me up in the morning with his car, and we would go back and forth together.

> We would go to the front of the factory and put on the apron, then he would drop us off in the evening. I kept saying, 'We will work like human beings with the union. It's the same bad work elsewhere; what will change?' Over time, people stopped coming, and Hakan and I ended it. I was borrowing money from friends because I couldn't work. There's no one left to borrow money from. I call my friends, and they don't answer because they know I will ask for a loan." (Mehmet, 25, Syrian Worker under TPS, Male)

When asked why the unionization effort at the AKBL Factory failed, and where mistakes were made, the interviewees, particularly citizen workers like Engin, Hakan, and Turgut, highlighted that the unionists frequently bringing up "political discussions" was a significant misstep. They particularly criticized the focus on issues that could alienate right-wing workers, rather than concentrating on the factory's internal agenda during union meetings.

From this perspective, it can be concluded that the approach of the DİSK Textile Union, which extended beyond traditional wage unionism and sought to address anti-immigrant sentiments among workers—a form of class unionism—was perceived by some workers as being "too political." This perception was exacerbated by the broader political climate in Turkey, where the regime often exploits ideological and ethnic differences among workers, deepening divisions and associating workers or trade unionists with terrorist organizations. These dynamics significantly complicated the unionization process, making it more challenging to maintain solidarity and achieve lasting success.

The failure of this unionization effort, despite its initial promise and the active participation of Syrian workers, underscores the difficulties faced by labour movements in contexts where political and ethnic divisions are manipulated by those in power. It also highlights the delicate balance that unions must strike between

addressing broader social issues and maintaining focus on the immediate, shared concerns of all workers, regardless of their political affiliations or backgrounds.

In his analysis of the 2015 wildcat strike process in the metal industry, referred to as the "Metal Storm", Tuğal (2018) argues that the AKP government has effectively "captured the spirit of Turkish-Sunni workers" by exacerbating sectarian and ethnic divisions among them. This strategy, Tuğal suggests, has led to a paradoxical situation where, despite the increasing militancy of the working class after 2015, workers have been kept at a distance from politics and public visibility due to fears of being labeled as "terrorists, extremists, agents," and other such terms by the state.

This fear is closely tied to the post-2015 national regime in Turkey, where any form of worker protest, whether against working conditions or collective bargaining agreements, can be easily branded as "terrorist" (Dağtaş and Yıldız, 2016: 114-119). The entanglement of politics and labour movements in this context makes it impossible for unions to remain apolitical or to retreat into the "safe harbor" of merely voicing economic demands. When workplace management calls on state law enforcement and local administrative authorities to suppress worker protests, the situation becomes inherently political, whether unions choose to acknowledge it or not. Therefore, trade unionists in Turkey face a particularly narrow gate, where navigating or circumventing the political challenges is not an easy task.

The boom in union membership during the AKBL Factory's organizing process can be largely attributed not only to the workers' solidarity with Hakan, who was dismissed, but also to the material and moral support provided by the union to Hakan. This support not only protected an individual member but also instilled a

sense of security and confidence among other workers involved in the ongoing unionization process. However, unions like DİSK Tekstil, which operate with very limited resources, face significant challenges in sustaining such support. The protracted nature of reinstatement cases in the Turkish legal system further exacerbates this issue, leading to frustration among both dismissed workers and those still employed, potentially undermining the broader organizing efforts.

The union's ability or inability to support workers who face retaliation for their organizing activities has implications beyond the immediate situation. It affects future unionization efforts in the region and shapes the trust relationship between workers and unions. For example, Mehmet, a Syrian worker under TPS who was promised a job by the union after the failed organizing attempt at the AKBL Factory, expressed deep disappointment when the union could not deliver on this promise. His resulting unemployment, debt, and social isolation illustrate the personal and social costs of such unmet expectations:

> "They couldn't find me a job. They said they would find me a job during the protest, but they couldn't. I became unemployed, I got into a lot of debt. Syrians don't see me. They know I have no money, they don't answer my phone. When I became unemployed, my phone went silent." (Mehmet, 25, Syrian Worker under TPS, Male)

The entrenchment of the perception that union membership leads to job loss is one of the main consequences of the weakening of job security for workers in Turkey, where employers frequently use dismissals as a tool against unionized workers (Hekimler, 2015: 132). Mehmet's experience of struggling during the unionization process, followed by unemployment and indebtedness, is likely to have a long-lasting negative impact on how workers perceive unions and their willingness to engage with them in the future. The perception that unions cannot protect workers, as reflected in the comment by another Syrian worker, Salih—"his court case is still

ongoing. It is a pity for him"—illustrates the broader challenge that unions face in maintaining credibility and trust among the workforce.

This situation highlights the complex dynamics of labour organizing in a highly politicized and repressive environment, where the risks for workers are high, and the capacity of unions to deliver on their promises is severely constrained by external factors beyond their control. The experiences of workers like Mehmet and Salih underscore the need for unions to find ways to sustain worker engagement and trust, even in the face of significant adversity.

The lessons drawn from the unionization process at the AKBL Factory by trade unionists and workers differ significantly, reflecting the various perspectives and experiences involved. Trade unionists, like Yusuf, highlight specific tactical mistakes, such as the timing of organizing efforts during a 9-day holiday period, but they also point to a critical oversight in the entire process: the lack of engagement with women workers. Yusuf, a Trade Union Expert, emphasized the missed opportunity to organize women workers, which he considers one of the most significant shortcomings:

> "Our most important shortcoming in this process was women workers. I don't remember the exact number, but it would have been good if we could have caught a vein among women workers. We held a meeting with 4-5 women workers, we discussed how we could organize women. The wives of the workers also work in the same factory; you cannot organize the woman without organizing her husband, or if you organize her, her husband gets angry. There were about 8-9 women workers in union, but we could not organize pioneer women workers who could organize women workers. They became members, but we could not organize the idea of organizing the women around them. If we organized women workers, we would have wiped them (management) out." (Yusuf, Trade Union Expert, Male)

This perspective underscores how patriarchal pressures, the additional responsibilities women bear—particularly domestic labour and family care—and logistical barriers like inconvenient meeting times all contributed to the failure to

fully engage women in the unionization effort. The lack of female labour agents within the union further limited the ability to connect with and organize women workers. Ece, a female worker at the AKBL Factory, provided insight into the gender dynamics at play:

> "Men were more active in the union. There were a lot of meetings. They thought, ‘Women can't deal with this either.’ Most of them were already married, they had children. If their husbands found out, they would have a lot of trouble. It's one thing if they go to the union, it's another if they get fired. The meeting times were not very convenient. We can't attend the meeting in the evening anyway. On the weekends, there was work at home, and we had to deal with the family. I attended two meetings. I don't remember any other women in both of them except me. When there are no women, there are no women." (Ece, 30, Citizen Worker, Female)

Ece’s account highlights how the timing and structure of union activities were not accommodating to women, who often had to shuttle work, domestic responsibilities, and familial expectations. This lack of inclusion likely contributed to the overall failure of the unionization effort, as it limited the potential base of support among workers.

By mid-September 2021, the unionization effort at the AKBL Factory had completely unraveled. The resistance led by Hakan, a citizen worker, and Mehmet, a Syrian worker under TPS, ended without achieving their goals. Hakan, who was dismissed in August 2021, pursued legal action for unfair termination on union grounds. Although his case concluded in July 2024 with a ruling for his reinstatement and the awarding of severance and notice pay, his claim for union compensation—equivalent to one year's salary—was rejected. After a three-year legal struggle, Hakan received the same amount the AKBL Factory management had originally offered at the start of the resistance, a sum that had significantly devalued due to high inflation and additional legal costs.

Mehmet's lawsuit, filed on similar grounds, is still ongoing. The drawn-out nature of these legal battles illustrates how protracted litigation processes serve as a tool of intimidation against workers, suppressing class mobilization and diminishing the organizational capacity of the working class. The experience at AKBL Factory demonstrates the significant barriers to successful unionization in Turkey, where legal, political, and social obstacles, combined with internal shortcomings, can derail even the most determined efforts.

It is important to recognise that unionisation in Turkey is a protracted and arduous process, primarily due to a legal framework that imposes significant obstacles to organising, compounded by the structural and political weaknesses of working-class organisations. Throughout the unionisation process at AKBL, the employer implemented various deunionisation strategies. In response, Ahmet, the Regional Representative of the DİSK Textile Union, frequently encouraged the workers, saying, "Hang in there, let's reach a sufficient number of members, and we will secure authorisation." However, the reality is far more complex. Once a union achieves the required membership threshold for unionisation in a workplace or enterprise, it must apply to the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. At this stage, the employer has the right to object to the union's application. This objection triggers a lengthy legal process, during which the courts determine whether the union is authorised to engage in collective bargaining on behalf of the workers.

These legal challenges significantly prolong the unionisation process, often spanning several years. The court battles that ensue—similar to the protracted reinstatement cases of Hakan and Mehmet—create a drawn-out struggle that can demoralise workers and weaken unions' momentum. Workers are acutely aware of this reality. Despite the unionists' assurances that "it's only a matter of time," they

understand that even if authorisation is granted, it could take years before meaningful progress is made. This prolonged timeline, embedded within Turkey's law system, serves as a key mechanism that dampens worker resistance and complicates the path to effective unionisation.

6.2 Where are we today? The possibility of a united struggle in Turkey

The final move by the AKBL Factory management in their deunionizationstrategy was to offer severance pay to workers in exchange for their resignation, effectively dismantling the already weakened unionization efforts. The solidarity among workers, which had been eroded by the management's previous tactics and the rapidly declining momentum of the unionization activity, gave way to a growing belief that the union's efforts would ultimately fail. As a result, many workers opted to take their severance pay and leave, driven by the widespread expectation that once the union threat was neutralized, the factory's working conditions would revert to their previous, less favorable state. This expectation proved accurate, as Turgut, a current employee at the AKBL Factory, reflected three years after the failure of the unionization attempt:

> "When they realized that the union was completely dead, everything slowly went back to the way it was before. The security supervisors took took the pain of those days out on us. The ban on slippers had been lifted with the union. Then they said only women were allowed. Finally, it was banned for everyone again. Things got heavy quickly. They got rid of a lot of people. Now they're still trying to cut down. One person is doing the work that two people would do. If the union had entered, this would not have happened." (Turgut, 38, Citizen Worker, Male)

Following the failed unionization effort in the summer of 2021, there were no further serious attempts to organize at the AKBL Factory. Compounding this setback, the leading trade unionists who had spearheaded the organizing activities at the factory were themselves dismissed from their union roles about two months after the

unionization process ended. First, Yusuf, a trade union specialist employed under a project on Syrian refugee labour by the Danish 3F Trade Union and DİSK Tekstil, was dismissed. Shortly thereafter, on November 11, Ahmet, the Regional Representative of the Trade Union, was also dismissed for "incompatibility in his working approach," and his employment was terminated.

Simultaneously with Ahmet's dismissal, unionization efforts in two separate textile factories in Şanlıurfa came to a halt, and workers involved in these efforts were dismissed. Ahmet contends that the union headquarters had established close relationships with the managements of these factories, bypassing him, and that the union president had made an agreement with the employers to facilitate his removal. This sequence of events—wherein unionists who attempted to organize the AKBL Factory were dismissed two months after the workers' unionization efforts had failed—represents an exceptional and disheartening outcome.

The dismissal of Ahmet, who had been a trusted figure among the workers in the AKBL Factory, sent shockwaves through the workforce. It is not difficult to surmise that the dismissal of a union representative who had been seen as an advocate for better working conditions and job security would further erode the workers' trust in the union. Mehmet, a Syrian worker under TPS and a key figure in the unionization process whose legal battle is still ongoing, described his reaction to Ahmet's dismissal in November:

> "There were Syrians working at AKBL after us. A friend I was close to called me and said 'get well soon,' 'they have dismissed your master.' I said 'what master, I don't have a master.' Then he told me that Ahmet was dismissed by the union. No lie, I was surprised. I said yes, Ahmet is my master." (Mehmet, 25, Syrian Worker under TPS, Male)

This account highlights the profound impact that Ahmet's dismissal had on those who had placed their trust in him and the union. The removal of a key union leader,

particularly in such a manner, likely reinforced feelings of disillusionment and betrayal among the workers, undermining any remaining faith in the union's ability to protect their interests. The broader implications of these events suggest that the combination of internal union challenges, external pressures, and strategic missteps can have long-lasting negative effects on workers' perceptions of and engagement with labour movements, particularly in environments where trust is already fragile.

Three years after the unionization efforts at the AKBL Factory, which aimed to unite citizen and Syrian workers under TPS in a collective struggle, there have been no significant advancements in similar organizing efforts across Turkey. This lack of progress occurs amidst a deepening crisis for the working class, characterized by a severe decline in purchasing power, rising housing and food costs, and a government strategy that seeks to suppress demand rather than address the root causes of high inflation. The AKP government’s policies, as outlined in the Medium Term Programme, commonly referred to as the "Şimşek Programme," exacerbate these conditions by avoiding necessary wage increases, further deepening the crisis for the working class (Orhangazi, 2024). On the other hand, the persistent crisis facing migrants in Turkey has deepened following the dispersal and sweeping policies that escalated after the 31 March 2019 local elections. The number of Syrians under Temporary Protection (TPS) fell from 3,737,369 in 2021 to 3,092,536 by September 2024, largely due to measures such as the closure of certain provinces to Syrian settlement, increasing rights violations and violence against migrants, and the coerced signing of voluntary return forms in Removal Centres. In this context of dilution and forced repatriation, the constant risk of deportation further constrains Syrians' ability to assert themselves in labour struggles, such as the unionisation efforts at the AKBL Factory. Every day, the Temporary Protection status provides

diminishing protection to Syrians, weakening their capacity for collective resistance. In this context, Turgut, a citizen worker who remained at the AKBL Factory after the failed unionization effort, expresses his doubts about the possibility of organizing a similar joint struggle with Syrian workers today:

> "We are in a difficult period right now. There may be discrimination because of this. Victory Party might be coming out of that. Syrians came from the war, I don't say anything about that. But if it wasn't for them, there would be more work here. The man employs Syrians cheaply. Don't get me wrong, I'm not angry with the Syrian, it's the boss and the state. If the Syrian man doesn't work, he can't live, he has to work, but our people are disgraced. Instead of employing one citizen, he employs two Syrians. Try to find a house here now, for example, you can't. Houses start at 15 thousand liras. My salary is already 18 thousand liras. What will I do if I am evicted? What will the minimum wage earners do? I am not taking a front against Syrians, I just want them to go home as soon as possible. If they left, there would be a need for labourers here, the prices of houses would fall. Everything has got worse in the last 3 years, life here has become difficult. Otherwise, I don't say anything against them." (Turgut, 38, Citizen Worker, Male)

Turgut's sentiments reflect the growing frustration and economic pressure felt by many workers, which, in turn, fuels anti-immigrant sentiment. Under these conditions, migrants and refugees in Turkey, including the 3,097,660 Syrians under TPS as of August 2024, are increasingly being scapegoated as the cause of economic and social hardships. This narrative is being driven by a nationalist and racist hysteria that seeks to divert public anger away from those truly responsible for these conditions. The institutionalization of anti-immigrant sentiment in Turkey, which has become deeply entrenched in mainstream politics, further exacerbates this situation.

A recent example of this trend is the statement by 41 civil society organizations in Gaziantep, including industrialists, businesspeople, tradesmen associations, and professional chambers, calling for the repatriation of Syrians as a solution to the "outcry of our people who are struggling to make ends meet in the aggravating economic conditions" (T24, 2024). This message, coming from the city where three years earlier the unionization activity at the AKBL Factory had sought to

unite citizens and migrants in a shared struggle, marks a significant shift in public discourse toward exclusion and division.

The rise of the far-right Victory Party, which was founded during the unionization struggle at the AKBL Factory and creates its fundamental political discourse on the deportation of migrants, further underscores this shift. The Victory Party garnered more than 1.215 million votes in the General Elections held on May 14, 2023, two years after the unionization effort. In the lead-up to the second round of the Presidential elections, the opposition's candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, signed a joint protocol with the Victory Party, promising to repatriate migrants within one year and to hand over the Ministry of Interior, which oversees the Directorate of Migration Management, to this far-right party. This protocol highlights how anti-immigrant sentiment has become a foundational element of the political landscape in Turkey.

The Victory Party's transformation from a marginal political actor into a mainstream force shaping the discourse of opposition parties, and its success in receiving 1,101,483 votes in the 2024 local elections despite not winning any mayorship, illustrates the deepening entrenchment of nationalist and exclusionary rhetoric in Turkish politics. This development poses significant challenges for any future efforts to organize collective labour struggles that include both citizen and Syrian workers under TPS, as the social and political environment increasingly favors division over unity.

The current economic, social, and political conditions in Turkey, as I have outlined, have made it significantly more challenging to organize joint struggles between migrant and citizen workers. The crises faced by the working class, coupled with the mainstreaming of extreme-right politics and the growing demand for the

repatriation of migrants, have created an environment where the "narrow door" to collective struggle has become even narrower. This situation is exacerbated by the pervasive anti-immigrant politics, which offers an appealing, wide-open gate for many, diverting attention from the true sources of economic and social hardship.

However, as demonstrated by the limited but significant unionization effort at the AKBL Factory, there is still hope. The increasing militancy of the working class in response to these crises provides a foundation upon which new experiences of collective struggle can be built, even in such a hostile environment. This potential is captured in the resilience of labour organizers and workers who refuse to be divided by ethnic or national lines, insisting instead on solidarity and joint struggle. At this point, I would like to remind of the lines in Andre Gide's text in which a priest reads from the Bible:

> “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat. Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.” (Gide, 1952: 15)

The anti-immigrant sentiment that is tried to be provoked in Turkey today offers wide, easy to pass through doors that, unfortunately, many people pass through due to its prevalence. But if there are narrow gates to the final emancipation of the working class, there will also be labour organisers who seek and find them. Like Hasan, the citizen worker in the AKBL Factory, there will be those who pass through the narrow gates:

> "I don't have any special enmity against Syrians, but I didn't like them much either. I wanted Syrians to leave because of rents, unemployment, all the problems. I wasn't lying, I was telling them too, I was saying ‘go to your country, brother.’ I was thinking like that until yesterday, but now I swear it's not like that. Because if I am going to get my rights in this factory, if we are going to be unionized, I will get my rights if I stand firm with that Syrian man." (Hasan, Citizen Worker, Male)

This shift in perspective, as articulated by Hasan, underscores the possibility of overcoming deeply entrenched prejudices and finding common cause in the fight for labour rights. It highlights the potential for solidarity even in the face of overwhelming odds, suggesting that while the gate to collective struggle may be narrow, it is not impossible to traverse. The persistence of labour organizers and workers who choose to walk this difficult path together offers a glimmer of hope that, despite the challenges, new and meaningful efforts at unionization and collective action can emerge in Turkey.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The ultimately unsuccessful unionization struggle of the DİSK Textile Union at the AKBL Factory in Gaziantep provides crucial insights into the dynamics of labour organizing in an ethnically fragmented working class, as well as the role of xenophobia in such struggles, both in Turkey and more broadly.

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that no labour struggle, whether it occurs in a small workplace or across a large city, exists in isolation from the broader macro-political context of a country. This context not only shapes the conditions of the struggle but also defines its meaning. However, as demonstrated by the limited experience at the AKBL Factory, the macro-political context is mediated through the autonomous activities of workers and trade unions, influencing the outcomes of such struggles.

Despite the widespread perception that migrants are responsible for economic challenges such as high unemployment and rising housing costs, and despite the broad appeal of anti-immigrant sentiment in Turkey, the AKBL Factory management was unable to exploit these ethnic divisions among workers as part of its deunionizationstrategy. The efforts of the DİSK Textile Union's leadership, which were rooted in class unionism and labour internationalism, played a crucial role in this outcome. From the outset, the union aimed to build solidarity between citizen and Syrian workers under TPS, engaging in discussions about migration and its associated challenges during union meetings. By emphasizing the unity and brotherhood of the working class against anti-immigrant discourses, the union successfully included Syrian workers under Temporary Protection Status (TPS) in

the struggle, transforming them into active participants. This approach temporarily transcended ethnic divisions, thereby limiting the effectiveness of the management's deunionizationtactics, and in some respects, preventing ethnic division from becoming a tool of the employer altogether.

In response to the union's strategy, the AKBL Factory management did not resort to overt hostility towards immigrants. Instead, they implemented by-passing and union substitution strategies. Initially, they made concessions to improve working conditions in the factory, alleviating some of the repressive measures and addressing basic worker demands. Ultimately, the management's final move involved offering workers cash payments and the option to resign with compensation, leveraging the ongoing vulnerabilities of the working class to dissolve the unionization effort.

This outcome highlights the broader context of the neoliberal transformation, which has made the working class more precarious and unorganized on a global scale. In Turkey, the economic crisis manifests as high unemployment, increasing precarity, rising housing costs, and a deepening crisis of purchasing power—all of which make workers more susceptible to the kinds of concessions offered by the AKBL management. Compounding this vulnerability is the increasing legal precarity that has characterized the neoliberal period. As seen in the cases of Hakan and Mehmet, the symbols of the resistance at AKBL, long and drawn-out legal proceedings can demoralize workers and undermine their resistance. The inability of these workers to secure union compensation reflects the broader issue of legal precariousness, which further weakens the working class and makes them more susceptible to employer tactics.

The national and international context, framed by authoritarian neoliberalism, forms a basis for the strategies and tactics employed by the capitalist class. Ultimately, the unionization struggle at the AKBL Factory was undermined by a comprehensive deunionizationstrategy that exploited these broader contexts, centering on concessions that took advantage of workers' vulnerabilities. The challenge for labour movements, therefore, is to prevent the division of the working class through such concessions and to reduce the overall vulnerability of workers.

The experience at the AKBL Factory, however limited, demonstrates that it is possible to organize and unionize in an ethnically fragmented working class, even in an environment rife with economic and social problems and pervasive xenophobia. The unionization activity at the AKBL Factory stands as a unique case where Syrian workers under TPS not only participated in the struggle but also played a leading role. However, for such struggles to succeed more broadly, it is essential to reduce the vulnerabilities of the working class. This requires fighting for a safer legal framework that protects workers, including macro-level struggles to increase job security and expand trade union rights and freedoms, particularly by making dismissals more difficult.

The local-scale efforts of the DİSK Textile Union were ultimately paralyzed by the broader vulnerabilities arising from the national and international context. Therefore, in a holistic sense, for the working class to secure legal guarantees against the capitalist class, the class struggle must be politicized on a national scale. This means that working-class parties, unions, and institutions must include on their agendas the need to fight for stronger legal protections, enhanced job security, and expanded rights and freedoms for workers to resist the pressures of neoliberal capitalism effectively.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (IN ENGLISH)

For Citizen Workers:

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself?

2. Have there been any changes in the factory since Syrian workers under TPS began working there?

3. Do you believe you work under the same conditions as Syrian workers under TPS in terms of working hours, wages, and other factors? Are there any differences that you perceive?

4. How were your relationships with Syrian workers under TPS? Have these relationships changed after the unionization process began?

5. Can you describe your experience with the unionization process? What were the primary goals of your organization? How did your communication with the union begin, and what were your key demands?

6. What challenges did you encounter during the unionization process?

7. Could you share your experiences during the struggle?

8. How did the rising anti-immigrant sentiment in Turkey, and events such as those in Altındağ, impact your unionization process and your relationship with Syrian workers under TPS? Did working together in the struggle alter your perspectives?

For Syrian Workers under TPS:

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself?

2. Do you believe you work under the same conditions as citizen workers in terms of working hours, wages, and other factors? Are there any differences that you perceive?

3. How were your relationships with citizen workers? Have these relationships changed after the unionization process began?

4. Can you describe your experience with the unionization process? What were the primary goals of your organization? How did your contact with the union develop, and what were your key demands?

5. What challenges did you encounter during the organization process?

6. Could you share your experiences during the struggle?

7. How did the rising anti-immigrant sentiment in Turkey, and events such as those in Altındağ, impact your unionization process and your relationship with citizen workers? Did fighting together in the struggle alter your perspectives?

For Trade Unionists:

1. Could you describe the onset of the organizing process in the factories where you worked to organize Syrian workers under TPS?

2. What challenges did you face when organizing citizen workers and Syrian workers under TPS together? What strategies did you develop to overcome these challenges?

3. What tactics did factory management use to prevent unionization? How did you counter these tactics, and how did they influence the unionization process?

4. From the beginning to the end of the unionization process, did you observe any changes in the relationships between citizen workers and Syrian workers under TPS, both among themselves and with you?

5. What were the key obstacles or failures in the organization process?

6. What aspects of the organizing process would you consider successful? What implications does the co-organization of citizen workers and Syrian workers under TPS have for Turkey?

For Experts:

1. What is the position of Syrian workers under TPS within the local labour market in Gaziantep?

2. How do Syrian workers under TPS participate in the workforce?

3. What are your observations regarding the relationships between citizen workers and Syrian workers under TPS in Gaziantep?

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (IN TURKISH)

Vatandaş işçiler:

1. Kendinizi kısaca tanıtabilir misiz?

2. Suriyeli işçilerin çalışmaya başlamasıyla fabrikada değişiklikler meydana geldi mi?

3. Çalışma süresi, ücret ve benzeri huşuları göz önüne aldığınızda Suriyeli mülteci işçilerle eşit koşullarda çalıştığınızı düşünüyor musunuz? Sizce aranızda farklar var mı?

4. Suriyeli işçilerle ilişkileriniz nasıldı? Sendikalaşma süreci sonrası bu ilişkilerde değişiklik oldu mu?

5. Sendikalaşma sürecinizi anlatır mısınız? Örgütlenme amacınız neydi? Sendika ile nasıl iletişiminiz nasıl kuruldu? Temel talepleriniz nelerdi?

6. Örgütlenme sürecinde nasıl zorluklarla karşılaştınız?

7. Mücadele sürecini anlatır mısınız?

8. Türkiye'de yükselen mülteci karşıtlığı, Altındağ gibi olaylar, sendikalaşma sürecinizi ve Suriyeli mülteci işçilerle olan ilişkinizi nasıl etkiledi? Birlikte mücadele etmek sizin tutumlarınızda bir değişiklik meydana getirdi mi?

Suriyeli işçiler:

1. Kendinizi kısaca tanıtabilir misiz

2. Çalışma süresi, ücret ve benzeri huşuları göz önüne aldığınızda Türkiyeli işçilerle eşit koşullarda çalıştığınızı düşünüyor musunuz? Sizce aranızda farklar var mı?

3. Türkiyeli işçilerle ilişkileriniz nasıldı? Sendikalaşma süreci sonrası bu ilişkilerde değişiklik oldu mu?

4. Sendikalaşma sürecinizi anlatır mısınız? Örgütlenme amacınız neydi? Sendika ile nasıl iletişiminiz nasıl kuruldu? Temel talepleriniz nelerdi?

5. Örgütlenme sürecinde nasıl zorluklarla karşılaştınız?

6. Mücadele sürecini anlatır mısınız?

7. Türkiye'de yükselen mülteci karşıtlığı, Altındağ gibi olaylar, sendikalaşma sürecinizi ve Türkiyeli işçilerle olan ilişkinizi nasıl etkiledi? Birlikte mücadele etmek sizin tutumlarınızda bir değişiklik meydana getirdi mi?

Sendikacılar:

1. İşçilerle nasıl bağ kurdunuz? Suriyeli mülteci işçileri örgütlendiğiniz fabrikalarda örgütlenme sürecinin başlangıcını anlatır mısınız?

2. Yerli ve mülteci işçileri birlikte örgütlerken süreç içerisinde karşılaştığınız zorluklar nelerdi? Bu zorlukları aşmak için nasıl stratejiler geliştirdiniz?

3. Fabrika yönetimleri sendikalaşmanın önüne geçmek için hangi yöntemlere başvurdu? Bu yöntemlere karşı nasıl mücadele ettiniz? Bu yöntemler, sendikalaşma sürecini nasıl etkiledi?

4. Sendikalaşma sürecinin başından sonuna yerli ve mülteci işçilerin birbirleriyle ve sizlerle olan ilişkilerinde değişiklikler meydana geldi mi?

5. Örgütlenmenin tıkandığı, başarısız olduğu noktalar nelerdi?

6. Örgütlenme sürecinin başarılı gördüğünüz yanları nelerdi? Yerli ve mülteci işçilerin birlikte örgütlenmesi Türkiye'ye ne anlatıyor?

Uzmanlar:

1. Gaziantep'te Suriyeli işçilerin yerel işgücü piyasasındaki konumu nasıldır?

2. Suriyeli işçilerin istihdama katılımı nasıl gerçekleşmektedir?

3. Gaziantep'teki yerli ve Suriyeli mülteci işçiler arasındaki ilişkilere dair gözlemleriniz nelerdir?

APPENDIX C

APPROVAL OF THE ETHICS COMMITTEE

T.C.
BOĞAZİÇİ ÜNİVERSİTESİ REKTÖRLÜĞÜ
Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu (Sbinarek)

Sayı : E-84391427-050.04-177947 02.05.2024
Konu : 2024-35T Kayıt Numaralı Başvurunuz Hakkında

Sayın Prof. Dr. Biray KOLLUOĞLU

Tez danışmanlığını yürüttüğünüz öğrenciniz Fırat Çoban'ın "Refugee Workers in Labour Movement: Possibilities and Limitations of a United Struggle in Gaziantep" başlıklı projesi ile Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu (SBİNAREK)'e yaptığınız 2024-35T kayıt numaralı başvuru 18.04.2024 tarih ve 2024/03 sayılı kurul toplantısında incelenmiş ve projeye etik onay verilmesi uygun bulunmuştur.

Bu karar tüm üyelerin toplantıya on-line olarak katılımıyla ve oybirliği ile alınmıştır. Onay mektubu tüm üyeler adına Komisyon Başkanı tarafından e-imzalanmıştır. Bilgilerinizi rica ederiz.

Saygılarımızla,

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Işıl ERDUYAN
Kurul Başkanı

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