Breaking the Negative Trade Union Perception in Turkey:
Case of Petrol-İs Organising Campaign

Res. Assist. Doğa Başar Sarıipek∗
Res. Assist. Arzu Özsoy Özmen**

Abstract

As in many places in the world, trade union movement in Turkey as well has been facing economic, social and political challenges leading significant adverse effects on its power and effectiveness. For the last 25-30 years, there have been numerous publications on the claims that trade unionism is in a serious crisis and its future is cloudy. Nevertheless, there are some leading opinions indicating that the power loss of trade unions may be overcome through new organising strategies designed in accordance with the current adverse conditions.

National and local union leadership, which is capable of understanding fast and continuous change caused by globalisation and technological developments, is required above all in order to enable trade union movement designing and implementing new and effective organising strategies. It is now necessary more than ever to gain new members for trade union movement instead of stealing the present members from each other. From this point of view, trade unions, particularly the ones in the countries where they experienced dramatic power loss, adopt different and new policies in order to create a strong member base to promote their bargaining power and to secure their income.

Those strategies are basically classified under two titles; service model and organising model. However, it is for sure that the organising model has come into prominence recently. Among the most effective means of organising model, empowering trade unions at the workplace, implementing organising campaigns and breaking the negative trade union perception in society are the foremost ones to discuss. Within this scope, the most concrete example in Turkey in terms of an effective organising campaign and breaking the social bias against trade unions is the “Introduction and Communication Campaign” of Petrol-İş. Petrol-İş aims not

∗ Kocaeli University, Labour Economics and Industrial Relations Department, Social Policy PhD Candidate
** Kocaeli University, Labour Economics and Industrial Relations Department, Social Policy PhD Candidate
only to strengthen its membership base, but also to break the general negative trade union perception as well as forming an appropriate ground for the new organising activities.

Modern communication and publicity techniques are applied in this campaign which was started in the end of May 2009 in the city of Düzce and it was aimed to support the local organising. The main communication materials used in the campaign are billboards, indoor posters, brochures, stickers, short campaign films for TV channels, spot speeches for radio stations, newspaper advertisements, campaign t-shirts, etc. Researches and discussions about the concrete outputs of this campaign still continue intensively.

The aim of this study is to discuss how effective this campaign has been for breaking the negative trade union perception in society and whether it contributed to increase the membership. Interviews with trade union professionals and specialists who took place actively in planning and implementing the campaign will be included in the study.

Keywords: Organizing, Trade Union Decline, Trade Union Revitalization, Turkey
Factors Weakening Trade Unions; A General Assessment

There has been an extensive debate on how far economic, political and societal changes are responsible for trade union decline over the past two decades. In this regard, we have been witnessing a steady decline in trade union density and an efficiency loss in social and political grounds almost all over the world. This clearly means, trade unions have been in crisis roughly since 1980s, due to a combination of external and internal factors. Among the main external factors, political attacks, globalisation and changes in the mode of production should be mentioned at the first place. As for the internal factors, the most common ones are rigidity and insufficient adaptation to changing circumstances.

With regard to external factors, there has been an ideological attack on the reason for being of trade unions and also on the belief in collective action on the one hand; the rise of neoliberalism has yielded the elevation of individualism on the other.(Pantland, 2010)

Employment in the sectors such as manufacturing where trade unions are traditionally strong has declined significantly, while there has been a growth of employment in the service sector and an increase in labour flexibility. The main problem arising from here is that workers in flexible and service sector jobs are generally disproportionately women, ethnic minorities, migrant workers, young people or other groups who are not traditionally close to trade unions. (Wallace and Clifford, 2000)

As is well known, however, the main problem emerges from internal affairs of trade unions. Unions are generally resistant to change and structurally not well-suited to organising this new, irregular workforce. In order to bring about a renewal and revitalisation, among other things, unions need to cover these new groups of workers, increase union democracy as well as the accountability of union structures. The task of organizing the unorganized workers is addressed virtually in all analyses as the only way of overcoming the crisis situation although little has been done so far in actual fact. Instead, most unions have tended to merge with or attack other unions to steal their members, which is much easier and cheaper than actually organizing the unorganized workers.
Current Situation in Turkey

Trade unions in Turkey did not appear as a class rooted social movement on the contrary to Western counterparts, but appeared under the state control in the scope of the principle of etatism and populism and they have constantly been hindered to become autonomous actors. Dissimilarity of Turkish case with the Western development path and relatively weak position of social actors should be identified as the substantial factors of trade union decline. Late industrialization of Turkey in comparison with Western countries and not having an industrial revolution as happened in the West as well hindered trade union rights to develop by a strong pressure emerging from bottom to the top (Celik, 2007; 42-43). In Turkey, alternatively, the principle of freedom of association was given to workers and public servants by the state without any pressure coming from workers. As a result of this, unions are still too far away having sufficient power to affect and shape the socio-economic policies of the governments. Rather, they only act in an area limited by the 1982 Constitution, the Trade Unions Act and the Collective Labour Agreement, Strike and Lockout Act.

In spite of the fact that the emerge and development of trade unions in Turkey is different from the Western counterparts, similar trade union decline practices have been experienced for the last 20-30 years. However, it is for certain that Turkey has a far deeper trade union decline due to its unique features. The weakness of labour in Turkey is a traditional fact, but it has been more obvious in especially recent decades. Although the union density is claimed higher than 50 per cent in formal statistics, it is actually estimated to be around 10-15 per cent of the total labour force. (Celik and Lordoglu, 2006; 28) This inconsistency between formal statistics and individual calculations appears because formal statistics only evaluates formal employment; the informal employment is not included in the calculation.

To mention it properly, there are several structural, institutional, legal and political factors in Turkey deepening the trade union decline. Main structural problems are insufficient labour force participation rates, high agricultural employment, so many small sized workplaces, large informal economy and the low share of paid workers in total employment. Economic instabilities and uncertainties since the middle of 1970s have been a strong obstacle against the development of trade unionism as well. On the other hand, emerge and development of trade unionism in public sector in Turkey should be identified as the most important institutional factor. This reality inevitably affected the institutional structure of trade unions.
and delayed the improvement of class-based trade unionism. Trade unions obtained substantial gains thanks to import substitution policies between 1960-1980 without the necessity of “class struggle”. However, as parallel to the changes in economic decisions towards neoliberalism after 1980, legal settings on trade unions and working life became stricter than ever before. (Celik, 2007; 41)

Trade Union Responses

In the face of this inappropriate environment, taking a step further by trade unions by planning appropriate responses became more crucial than ever. As is well known, traditional organizing activities previously focused on blue collar male workers working on a full time basis with job security to some extent, relatively high wages and open-ended contract at manufacturing or public sectors where organizing was rather easy. However, this organizing type lost its importance due to the rise in the number of unorganized workers and heterogeneity among them. Therefore, organizing the unorganized workers occupies the crucial part in the revitalization efforts of trade unions today. As a result of this, trade unions, in addition to the efforts of protecting their existing members, will get stronger through new members in unorganized sectors on the one hand, and they will lead an increase in the number of organized workers throughout the country on the other. (Urhan, 2005;100-101)

In the scope of revitalization, two main action alternatives emerged in the labour movement: the service model and the organizing model. While this division may be seen oversimplified, it is still among the most commonly applied alternatives in studies.

Service model may be by far the most widely used model of union organizing both in past and at present. This model emphasizes economic exchange. Members pay their dues, and their commitment to the union is based largely on instrumental considerations. The role of the union is to deliver services to passive and dependent members. (Bamberger, Avraham, and Ronena, 1999;18) Union delivers those services by its expert staff. While they handle the main activities in the union, members just pay dues to the union and when they need a service, then they receive this service. We may identify these services as advocacy in collective disputes and individual grievances, legal advice and a range of non-industrial benefits (e.g. discounted insurance and travel). Since union’s elected and appointed officials are the
providers of these services, their performance is judged by members. (Child, Loveridge and Warner, 1973;75)

With regard to organizing model, the principle underlying it is to give power directly to union members. In other words, ‘self-activity’ or activism of the members is the main notions that underlie the model. Recruiting new members into trade unions, therefore, should be realized through mobilizing workers in campaigns. This is exactly the point that organising model is contrasted with the service model.(Selamoğlu, 2003;73-74)

However, activating workers is not only put into effect in the recruiting phase, but also workers are expected to find collective solutions to work-related concerns, too. In this sense, some worker-to-worker organising efforts are applied. Visits to workers’ homes, informal small-group meetings, and the establishment of large committees of workplace representatives may be identified as the most common worker-to-worker organising efforts through which union commitment and linkages among workers are cultivated. Trade unions’ share in this process is to empower workers to gain the sense and skills of self-confidence, leadership and collective problem-solving through education programmes. (Fletcher and Hurd,1998;43)

**An Organizing Campaign in Turkey: Case of Petrol-Is**

Petrol-Is (Petroleum Chemical Rubber Worker's Trade Union) was established by petroleum workers in 1950. Today, it is organized at petroleum, chemical and rubber sectors. Petrol-Is had totally 88569 members in 2009 as the biggest union in its sector. [http://www.csgb.gov.tr/csgbPortal/ShowProperty/WLP%20Repository/csgb/dosyalar/istatistikler/2009_ocak_2821](http://www.csgb.gov.tr/csgbPortal/ShowProperty/WLP%20Repository/csgb/dosyalar/istatistikler/2009_ocak_2821) It has a concrete and exclusive stand thanks not only to its efforts on labour issues, but also to its traditional claim that macroeconomic and social problems can be only solved through more freedom, more justice and more equality beyond the pragmatist trade unionism. We can see the reflections of this basic belief in its actions. Petrol-Is is against privatization of basic services, like education and health, as well as defending the right of work, insurance, organize and unlimited job security for everyone. [http://www.sendikaliol.org/petrol_is.html](http://www.sendikaliol.org/petrol_is.html) In short, as is also understood from this and such

---

*Important details of this organizing campaign were gathered via an interview which was held in 23rd March 2011 with one of the leading organizing experts of Petrol-Is.*
many other things, Petrol-Is is an effective union both nationally and in its sector through several campaigns and publications.

Petrol-Is, accordingly, initiated an organizing campaign, which may lead to Turkish labour movement, by using some certain introduction and communication channels. Modern communication and propaganda techniques were applied in this campaign. This organizing campaign originally initiated in Düzce in May 2009 and then spread to Bursa, Gebze and İzmir. This campaign is the main focus of our study since it is unique for having a potential to yield a new dynamism in Turkish organizing agenda.

This organizing campaign was designed by two aims (Petrol-İş Journal, 2009;21-22):

1. To provide recognition of Petrol-Is among workers at local level, encourage them to organize and communicate them.

2. To constitute a positive local public opinion about organizing and Petrol-Is.

The president of Petrol-Is once stated that eliminating the barriers to organizing is one of the main targets of this organizing campaign. In this sense, the emphasis of “organizing is a constitutional right” has continuously been repeating by the union. (Sky Türk TV, 2010) However, in an interview which we held with an organizing expert of Petrol-İş, he mentioned that the most concrete aim of this campaign was (for just Düzce) to organize in a certain factory in Düzce. Besides, he defined it as an effort for “creating a positive atmosphere” to organize. Social environment of workers were aimed to reach instead of the factories directly since raising the awareness among the worker class towns and families is the real important thing. In this sense, the performers in short films and posters were chosen from the Petrol-Is members. Moreover, a special attention was paid while choosing other professional actors/actresses to be popular and sincere.

Start point of the campaign dates back to a book named “Suggestions for Organizing Efforts” published in 2006 after a range of debates, data gathering and collectively assessment sessions to identify the main principles, aims and policies of Petrol-İş organizing strategy. However, Petrol-İş was not able to start the organizing campaign until the summer of 2008 due to the busy agenda of the union itself and staff change to some extent. (Petrol-İş Journal, 2009;21) The campaign was hardly started in 2009.
Petrol-İs carried out some other successful organizing campaigns in the past as well. In 2005, in a campaign which was against privatization of Tüpras where Petrol-İs was organized intensely, many different methods such as protests, reports, billboard posters, spots on TV and radio, TV programs, press announcements, etc. were applied. (Petrol-İş Journal, 2009;22-23) Awareness was raised among the public after this campaign. This anti-privatization campaign, therefore, is an important experience indicating that Petrol-İs has a strong organizing tradition.

Petrol-İs has been applying those materials and methods in its organizing campaign:

- Billboard posters,
- Indoor posters
- Brochures
- Declarations
- Stickers
- Short campaign films for TV
- Short spot speeches for radio stations
- Newspaper advertisement
- “Do you know your rights?” advertisements in newspapers
- Campaign t-shirts
- A web site for the campaign.(http://www.sendikaliol.org)

In brief, within the scope of the campaign, 3 TV films each of them 30-second-long, 9 TV spots each of them 10-second-long, and 7 radio spots, countless press announcements, posters, declarations, brochures and outdoor advertisements have been applied. In our interview, Petrol-İs expert identified the unique features of the campaign as follows:

- Maybe for the first time in the organizing history of Turkey, an organizing campaign started with an explicit declaration of intent. While organizing campaigns used to be carried out in secret in the past since to avoid job losses, this time all organizing efforts has been performing explicitly by trying to get public support through the advertisements.
- Some materials have been applied for the first time.
- The style and the methods used in this campaign were different from the traditional ones to some extent.
This campaign has been supported by a professional advertising agency.

While preparing the contents of the written materials, like brochures, advertisements etc., union’s expert staff made a major contribution. Real Petrol-Is members took part in all posters and other materials. Besides the sense of reality, organizational solidarity and commitment were achieved by this. As is mentioned before, this campaign was initiated in May 2009 in Düzce by hanging posters on billboards and bus stops. In those posters, workers from all sectors and all places have been called for joining the trade union by the smiling union member workers wearing their work uniforms. Those campaign materials invited all workers to join a trade union by emphasizing that their common identity comes from getting organized under a trade union without considering region, gender, age, political view, etc. based bias and discriminations. With regard the brochures and writings in the website, rather didactic information, such as the meaning, functions and importance of trade union, is offered with simple and clear expressions. (Sky Türk TV, 2010; www.sendikalioi.org)

Although it is normally very expensive, all three campaign films were shot free of charge thanks to voluntary supports and contributions. In this regard, labour-friendly performers, directors, film set workers contributed to the campaign for free or by charging under the normal value. Together with the equipment contributions from some production companies with whom the agency was already in relation, these campaign films were shot with very low costs. They were broadcasted in the local TV and radio stations of Düzce in prime time. Similarly, campaign posters and “do you know your rights?” sections that informing workers about their legal labour rights were put on all local newspapers. (Petrol-Is Journal, 2009;26)

As another stage of the campaign, in 8 June 2009, a publicity kiosk was placed at the city centre of Düzce for a week with the intent of increasing the campaign awareness and touching Düzce workers directly. A walk from Düzce branch of Petrol-Is to the kiosk was also organized by handing out campaign t-shirts, flowers, brochures and other materials to the public on the way. Union officials gave some useful information about Petrol-Is, its campaign and the general legal labour rights at the kiosk. In the evening of the same day, a dinner invitation was organized with the participation of all labour related institutions of Düzce and representatives of trade unions, local media, political parties and other civil society organizations. In the following days, president of Petrol-Is and other campaign officials joined
local TV programmes and told the details of the campaign to the public more. (Petrol-Is Journal, 2009;26)

Second stage of the campaign was initiated in Bursa, Gebze and İzmir-Kemalpaşa in January 2010. As such in Düzce, publicity kiosks were placed at the centres in addition to the publications in local TV stations and newspapers in those cities, too. (Olay TV, 2010; Ulusal TV, 2010)

One of the basic aims of Petrol-Is is spreading this campaign to all cities and trade unions since it requires a material and moral association. In this sense, it called other trade unions and confederations for running the campaign all together, but unfortunately no concrete step was taken about this matter. Therefore, Petrol-Is has been trying to do its best to run the campaign with its own resources and power. (Sky Türk TV, 2010)

When we evaluate the results of the campaign, while measuring them for certain is not possible, it is for sure that the organizing atmosphere of Düzce has changed positively and trade union representation has increased in number. (Sky Türk TV, 2010; www.sendikaliol.org) Many phone calls from unorganized workers received to the union after reading the posters and other materials. Moreover, workers from different sectors expressed their wish to have such a campaign in their own sectors soon. This campaign made a significant contribution to reach a positive public opinion about labour and trade unions. Also, as an internal positive effect, organizing activities in trade unions shined again among others after this campaign.

Conclusion

In such a period that trade union decline is deepening in Turkey, the efforts of Petrol-Is relating to revitalize organizing is a promising development for Turkish labour movement.

While the definite results of the campaign have not been received yet, it is anyway for sure this campaign is a good sign indicating trade unions in Turkey have started to come alive. Above all, so far secretly performed organizing efforts in Turkey started to run explicitly after this campaign. Moreover, it is an important step taken forward to announce the public their constitutional right of organizing and making them gain a societal conscious through
communication instruments. We hope such campaigns will set the pace for other trade unions and initiate new but more comprehensive campaigns in the level of confederations.

References


http://www.petrol-is.org.tr

http://www.sendikaliol.org (Accessed:10.03.2011


