

# **THE EVOLUTION OF PRIVATISATION IN TURKEY AND ITS IMPACT ON TURKISH TRADE UNIONS**

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## **Introduction**

In many countries, irrespective of their regimes or stages of development, the policies of governments in the 1980s dramatically shifted in favour of market-based solutions as opposed to the previous dominant “Keynesian” approach to economic management. Their policies focused on improving public sector performance by several forms of “commercialization”, such as deregulation and privatization (Ferner 1988). Thus, the privatization of public enterprises has become a key strategy in governments’ market-oriented approaches. Basically, the privatization programmes have been designed to reduce the size and scope of the public sector and strengthen the market.

Turkey, like most other countries followed the privatisation (ozellestirme) trend. The sell-off philosophy has been a central pillar of governments economic policy since 1984, even if the results so far have been sometimes less than convincing. Here, the Turkish experience with privatization, and more importantly, its impact on trade unions will be examined.

## **State Economic Enterprises (SEEs) and the Privatization Process in Turkey**

In the 1930s, the “etatist” period of the country, State Economic Enterprises (SEEs) provided the initial impetus for industrialisation in Turkey. In the post-war period while SEEs continued to play a central or modified role in industrialisation, they also helped the development of private business, particularly through providing subsidized inputs to the private sector, a process facilitated by extensive price deregulation<sup>1</sup>.

As a result of the structural adjustment programme in 1980, government shifted its economic policy from the import substitution strategy to export-oriented growth. The general thrust of the strategy was to rely on market forces and reduce the scope for state intervention especially in economic activities. The SEEs were viewed as one of the causes of economic crises in the 1970s. The underlying problems of the SEEs, often stressed by the governments, were as follows: low productivity and efficiency; decline in the growth and profits of organisations which in turn created financial problems for government budgets; uncompetitiveness in their market shares and the absence of

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autonomy and managerial incentives. The latter may be due to frequent interference from politicians and bureaucrats and a considerable increase in militancy in public sector unions, particularly in the late 1970s.

In addition, labour hoarding was regarded as another problem of the public sector because public sector employment in Turkey was expanded, mostly due to political concern with generating support for the government in power. After returning to a democratic regime, the pressures and proposals in favour of privatisation of the SEEs were intensified by the Ozal conservative government. Hence, privatization appeared one of the most significant parts of the policy agenda of the government for the first time in 1984.

For the government, privatisation would offer a way to make the economy more responsive to the market, so increasing industrial efficiency and generating real growth. It would also be a tool to increase the liquidity of the capital markets, to reduce budget outlays to industry and provide a flow of badly needed revenues to the exchequer.

Two main strategies seemed crucial during the privatisation process. First, the government identified the key state companies, TURISAN (a tourism chain), THY (the Turkish National Airlines), and USAS (an airline catering company) which were given the priority to be privatised. Controversially, all these companies were very profitable and productive. This was somewhat against the government's thinking that through privatization these companies would become more productive and efficient. Second, the government also identified the major candidates (or customers) as ideal buyers for privatisation. Foreign investors rather than domestic ones were chosen as the principal candidates for taking over the companies. Three basic ways were used to implement privatization in the Turkish case: first, direct sales of public sector companies. This involves a complete transfer of ownership from public to the private sector. Second, transferring the management rights of the companies, and finally, selling off the stakes of the companies (Akguc 1991). However, in Turkey domestic companies were interested in obtaining the management rights of the highly profitable public enterprises rather than taking them over. This might also have been one of the reasons that the government encouraged multinational companies to buy these enterprises.

The main thought here is that through considering international competition and the adaptation of free market principles, foreign economic relations of Turkey in the 1980s became more significant for the government's strategies. In the 1960s and 1970s the public sector was considered as the most important element of the programme of national reconstruction and as the 'assistant' to domestic private capitalist development. In contrast, since the 1980s, the public sector through privatization has been regarded as an aid to attract foreign capital. It is obvious that the government was concentrating on privatisation not only as a means of improving company competitiveness or efficiency but also as a crucial strategy for promoting the development of the capital market, mainly international capital.

Although it seemed initially quite ambitious, the Turkish privatization programme has been problematic. Several reasons can be given for the failure of the privatisation programme. Firstly, the legal base of privatization was not clear; therefore, the government was faced with the cancellation of three major sales by judicial decision. Second, there was considerable opposition from interest groups including employees, unions, shopkeepers, small producers, and farmers as well as the established bureaucrats and some managers in the SEEs who might be affected by privatization. Within parliament the opposition parties such as SHP (left of centre) and RP (Islamic party) were also significant opponents. The parties opposed the privatization programme on the grounds that the programme was designed to solve the fiscal problems — by regarding it as a budget-deficit financing technique. They were also concerned about selling off some of the SEEs which would be strategically crucial on economic and military grounds to foreigners.

Some academics in Turkish universities also began discussing the legal basis of privatization. The themes like “government choice” or “public choice” and “property rights” were debated<sup>2</sup>, and for them political rationality would come progressively into conflict with market rationality. During the period between 1980–1990 opposition by unions was considerable, even before the implementation of privatization, because wage restraint in collective bargaining, the creation of a new status for some workers as “contract employees”, contracting-out and massive lay-offs appeared as a preparation for privatization.

With the formation of the DYP (the Conservative True Path Party) and SHP (the Social Democratic Populist Party) coalition government following the October 20, 1991 election, the privatization programme became more complicated, particularly after Mrs Ciller became prime minister. While she has wanted to speed up the privatisation process, Mrs Ciller’s junior partner, SHP has tended to adopt an essentially cautious and pragmatic approach to privatization. As a result, the political constraints on privatization have become considerable. For example, due to the attempts of some MPs like Mumtaz Soysal of the SHP, the privatization of PTT (Posta, Telegraph and Telecommunication) and TEK (Electricity) still remains blocked by the court.

### **The Impact of the Privatization Process on Unions**

It can be argued that government’s approach was also fundamentally to reshape the industrial relations system during the 1980s. In relations with privatized industries, and enterprises in preparation for privatization, there is evidence of new comprehensive industrial relations strategies, in some cases including the reduction of labour forces, the exercise of new management practices, changes in the structure of collective bargaining, and contracting-out of some economic activities to private firms. These developments amounted to a policy of labour exclusion particularly affecting public sector trade unions.

In the Turkish public sector a system of “tripartite political exchange” between public sector unions and governments had been developed. In other words, in the 1960s-1970s the sector not only helped the consolidation of economic development for the country, but also ensured a margin of comparative stability for union organisations and created the conditions for union growth which reached a density of 80%-90% percent. However, this “tripartite political exchange” was diminished through the abolition of the “workers’ participation scheme” in the SEEs in 1983. It can be assumed that exclusion from political exchange may reduce unions’ effectiveness in this sector. In this respect, unions may be forced to move into a more uncertain situation as compared to the previous, relatively stable framework of relations.

The SEEs cover around 750 thousand employees, with their family members this affects an interest group of about 4 million people. There is no doubt that the privatization programme has already affected TURK-IS (Turkey’s largest labour confederation), since it is largely organised in the public sector. From a review of the various publications of unions (Petrol-is, Yol-is, Kristal-is, Harb-is, Hava-is, Deri-is, Basisen, Turkiye, Denizciler, Demiryol-is and Tekgida-is) it is clear that in general, they all consider the privatization effort as a move which aims to undermine the trade union movement. The main concern is that a large number of workers in the public sector will be laid off before and after privatization. For example, the attempts of the Ministry of Transportation to contract certain activities to private companies, and thus reducing the workforce, can be seen as a step towards privatization.

Unions also criticized the policy on the ground that the government announced the sale of the most profitable companies to private capital, particularly foreign companies. For them, “national interests” are in danger. The key question is why the government does not rehabilitate or sell off the inefficient SEEs. Therefore, their criticism also centres on the policy choices of government in the privatization programme (see various publications of Yol-is, Petrol-is, Turkiye Belediye-is, Agac-is, Hava-is, Saglik-is and Deri-is)<sup>3</sup>.

Most unions regard the state owned companies as a symbol of Turkey’s economic and political independence and “public property”. They also stress the social function of these enterprises. Firstly, the SEEs have had a considerable function in correcting imbalances in the distribution of national income, mainly through regulating and sometimes stabilizing the prices of goods. Second, the enterprises have made an important contribution to social stability by creating employment, particularly in newly emerging cities such as Zonguldak, Karabuk etc. This also created further jobs for local shopkeepers in those areas and discouraged people from emigrating to large cities for jobs. Finally, the SEEs introduced most of the social welfare programmes and contributed to the education of workers as well as managers. For unions, the problems of productivity and efficiency derived from mismanagement.

However, widespread doubts among Turkish trade unionists centre on the possibility of lay-offs and losing members following privatization. In fact, after the

privatization of five cement companies, USAS (an airline catering concern), and ANSAN (a cola bottling company) and later TELETAS (a Telecommunication company), massive lay offs were witnessed. For example, Swedish Airlines SAS service partners took over USAS, and within one year 50% of the workers were laid-off (Cumhuriyet, 1993). During 1987-1991 the five cement companies (CITOSAN) were bought by Fransiz SCF (Societe des Ciments Francais), and since then 8,000 workers have been dismissed. After buying major stakes in the Telephone company (TELETAS), Belgium Bell Telephone Manufacturing forced the company to dismiss 25% of its workforce (Hava-Is 1993).

In the petroleum, chemical and rubber industries, according to Petrol-Is' officials<sup>4</sup>, the Akdeniz Fertilizer Factory was sold off to a private Turkish company, Tekfen Holding, in 1989. Before the privatization process, Tekfen Holding employed 740 workers and among these, 668 belonged to Petrol-Is; however, three years later, in 1992, these figures were 398 and 306 respectively. The rate of unionisation in this company dropped from 90.2% to 76.8%. What is more, after massive lay offs, the jobs done by previous workers were given to subcontractors. In the same industries, IPRAGAZ was sold off to a French-owned company, Primagaz, and within five years workers who belonged to the union were all dismissed, and the company became union-free in the end.

The president of Hava-Is<sup>5</sup>, Attila Aycin, claims in an interview that there have been serious changes in the status of unions and in collective bargaining arrangements after the privatization of most companies. There have also been observable moves in management practices, including more restrictions imposed on recruitment of new employees, increases in unfair dismissals and flexibility demands as regards working hours. Managements also sought to introduce various individualist methods of employee participation and reward. For example, performance-related pay was introduced in most cases. Mr Aycin pointed out that, after privatization, in most companies unionised workers were first targeted to be dismissed.

The implications of privatization for trade unions in Turkey seem to be very complicated for two crucial reasons. First, there has not been any serious ownership changes in large and important SEEs where unions would be badly damaged (6). After negotiating with IMF and the World Bank, the Ciller government announced that around 25%-40% of the workforce in the public sector are likely to be laid off (Petrol-Is 1993). Second, in spite of the fact that it is too early to draw a general conclusion about the implementation of privatization on unions in general, it is, however, possible to examine the effect of the preparation periods for the privatization process on unions. In other words, remarkable changes taking place before privatization might be regarded as prerequisites for privatization. The companies were effectively restructured in preparation for privatization.

## **The Effect of the Preparation Period for the Privatization Process on Unions**

In this context, it is quite safe to argue that particularly after 1984 the conservative governments' deliberately imposed new labour practices on state-owned companies, which have undermined union power in the public sector. These practices include some typical outcomes of the privatization process.

### *The creation of a category of 'contract employees'*

As part of its market orientation philosophy and privatization programme, the Ozal government imposed new policies on the public sector. According to the new personnel regime, there would be three categories employed by the SEEs, namely: "civil servants"; "workers" who are employed under a labour contract; and "contract employees". The last category aimed to curb union power by denying unionization rights, collective bargaining rights and job security against lay-offs. In 1992 this category covered 190,356 employees in the public sector. This means that out of 620,282 total employees in the sector, 30.68% of employees were employed as "contract employees" and thus became non-unionised between 1985-1992 (KIT Raporu 1993).

### *Contracting-out*

In the late 1980s the contracting-out of certain work to outside firms also became significant as part of government deregulation policies. Contracting-out has been used to allow private companies to enter the market. Essentially, the government has made use of it to hand over to private companies certain public services, including postal services, municipal services, distribution of electricity and auxiliary services in the SEEs. Other types of work including public works, construction or repair of highways, dams, and auxiliary facilities for SEEs' plants were also undertaken on a subcontracting basis. According to research carried out by Petrol-is in the petroleum, chemical and rubber industries, in 1990 11.8% of the total workforce worked for subcontractors without any union affiliation (Petrol-is 1991). Another more recent development is also the crucial tendency of municipal authorities to contract out some of the local public services such as sanitation, meter-reading, refuse collection and maintenance of parks to outside companies in response to the budget problems of large cities — in particular, Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. The Municipal Employees' Union (Belediye-is 1993) reported that after contracting-out these activities, 1,789 workers were dismissed, and all of them were union members. Contracting-out was regarded by most unions within the privatization sphere as the cause of the deunionisation process.

### *Lay-offs in the public sector*

The increase in reported lay off cases before and during the privatization process is also noteworthy. This, indeed, gave rise to loss of membership and of unions' bargaining

status and their power at some plants. For instance, dismissals reported by Turk-is affiliated unions in 1992 were 39,609 workers in all sectors, and out of this total around 28,000 workers were laid off in public enterprises alone, sometimes through “compulsory retirement”. The unions also noted that dismissals in the public sector were mostly due to the privatization process. In fact, the figures not only show the large number of dismissals but also the loss of union membership, since unionized workers were the primary target during the redundancy cases (Petrol-is 1993). In short, these anti-union practices can be attributed to the government’s privatization programme. There is a phrase in Turkish: “A Rose Garden without thorns”. This means, in this context, that the government would sort out all labour problems before selling off the companies to domestic and foreign capital.

The first important government move was to stop the expansion of employment and to initiate large scale lay offs in the SEEs. Two significant factors seems to lie behind these reductions: (a), restructuring of working practices to increase labour productivity, and (b), termination of uneconomic activities. Second, contracting out of some economic activities of these companies to outsiders was implemented with considerable effectiveness. The hiring of contract workers also became significant. These policies helped to reduce potential membership and diminish union power. Third, in order to make these enterprises more attractive for buyers, the aim of the government was also to turn them into profitable companies. As a result, increases in wages were limited and real wages subsequently fell.

This was made possible by the creation of the so-called “public sector collective bargaining coordination board” in 1984 and further the establishment of the public sector employers’ associations in 1986. These organisations pursued a bargaining policy much tougher than in the 1960s and 1970s. The probable reason for this is, that in the 1960s and 1970s, government approaches towards labour relations in the public sector were more pragmatic. State enterprises were used for political objectives. Compared with the private sector, public sector managers were more tolerant in their relations with unions. One additional reason is that, particularly in the late 1970s, the public sector witnessed the emergence of politicization within workers. Therefore, during the 1980s the emphasis also shifted towards depoliticizing public sector labour relations.

The fourth, important factor that caused the undermining of public sector unions was the artificially-created “contract employee” category, who are denied the right to join unions. This has, clearly, brought about serious membership loss for unions.

### **The Possible Future Effects of Privatization on Unions**

A crucial question which can be raised here is what is the possible further impact of privatization in the future on the role of Turkish trade unions? In other words, how will this development affect the traditional pattern of labour relations and the role of unions in general? A pessimistic scenario can first be suggested. As part of the government’s

deregulation and privatization efforts, a legislative change was made in 1986. According to Article 3 of the 1986 amendment (Act no.3299) "in the public sector, a single enterprise-level collective agreement should be made when enterprises or plants have independent legal corporate status as a result of separation". This is to say that when the enterprises or plants are broken up and sold piecemeal, the privatized plant will have separate bargaining with independent legal corporate status. This means that the existing collective bargaining and labour relations might be disrupted. And different unions are likely to claim bargaining rights for the same companies.

Thus, the disruption of the bargaining relationship can further give rise to inter-union rivalry. Privatized enterprises may tend to diversify their economic activities into new branches and this can have profound implications for unions. While the traditional pattern of labour relations with established unions in the core business will continue at least in the foreseeable future, the new branches of privatized companies may choose union-free environments. The removal of political control by governments and Ministers will encourage the autonomy of managements to make direct industrial relations decisions and implement new workplace practices at workshop level. While this can reduce the influence of government or ministers, the capacity of management to exercise strategic choices at plant level is likely to be increased. In addition, in the new deregulated environment, a desire to reduce labour costs and to strengthen management control by slashing the size of the workforce and restructuring the companies' labour relations practices will probably prevail.

On the other hand, it is also possible to draw a relatively optimistic picture of the implementation of privatization on the future of unions in Turkey. First, privatization will probably result in the replacement of the "political orientation of management" by "market orientation of management". This means that privatized enterprises will be released from direct ministerial control. Therefore, government intervention in collective arrangements will be eliminated and the chances of establishing "free collective bargaining" will be increased. This will also change the domination of right-wing unions in the public sector (these unions traditionally established good relations with the ministries of conservative parties). Hence, there would be substantial opportunities for unions as well as their confederations to set up new balances within the privatized enterprises to discuss new dimensions or strategies, as against their traditional way of dealing with labour relations. Second, some managements of privatized companies are also likely to prefer to carry on the institutionalised trade union relations, since they do not know how to deal with conflict with workers and the grievances etc. In this case, unions can be considered an important element for management to take into account while preparing its strategic innovations. Third, assuming the whole company is sold off, this means merely a change of ownership; the status of unions can remain unchanged within the same industry. As a result, employees who have been under the "contract employees" status in the public sector are likely to regain "worker" status. As "contract employees" some civil servants may also move into "worker" status, since they are no

longer considered public sector employees. Therefore, they will begin to enjoy the same union freedoms, including the right to strike, and this could help unions extend their membership. Fourth, if one analyses Turkish legislation on strike activities it becomes clear that some strike restrictions are imposed only if activities such as land, sea and rail transportation are performed by public agencies. So after privatization these workers will be entitled to the right to strike, unless the system of compulsory arbitration is imposed on these activities.

Some recent developments on this issue make it even more difficult to write a general conclusion. One thing, however, is becoming more obvious; irrespective of pessimistic or optimistic predictions, it can be argued that uncontrolled workers' action against privatisation is likely to determine future developments. In fact, after the government announced a new austerity programme which includes extensive privatization and factory closing programme on 5th April 1994, the responses of unions have been very striking. Most unions have started organising marches and demonstrations against government policies.

## **Conclusion**

The attempts at privatization in Turkey resemble some general trends in Europe, where it has been widely discussed with reference to the UK case — with its focus on neo-liberalism or Thatcherism and the association of an ideological and political campaign against the public sector, mainly concentrated on radical anti-unionism. However, in the Turkish case it would be wrong to talk about an explicit fundamental anti-unionism. Government strategy was, initially, to focus on the question of the “inefficiency”, “uncompetitiveness” or “unprofitability” of public sector companies so as to defend privatization as the only way out of the structural crisis of the Turkish economy. The privatization process in recent years can also be regarded as part of the ideological offensive of Turkish capital and government to weaken the trade unions.

In short, the main question is whether the unions can strategically organise resistance against these changes or collaborate in the modification of industrial relations patterns. In this sense, the other critical questions are whether the government seeks “compromise” for a more productive environment or tries to adopt a strategy of “labour exclusion” policies. After responding to these questions, the next ones might be whether trade unions can respond to the pressure for change by mobilising workers' resistance; or can they participate to influence the nature of the new strategies?

However, unions' statements and policies do not demonstrate one single approach in their reaction to the privatisation process. Right-wing unions within TURK-IS, like Turk-metal, Teksif, Dok Gemi-Is, saw the privatization programmes as a form of economic rationality, whereas social democrats and moderate factions of TURK-IS, such as Hava-Is, Deri-Is, Petrol-Is, Basisen, Turk Harb-Is, Turkiye Belediye-Is, regard this move as a politically motivated phenomenon.

Yol-Is (1988) stated that the SEEs would be sold off in favour of domestic and foreign capital. Harb-Is was against privatization on the grounds that this is a strategic choice of government to undermine wages and social rights. Belediye-Is argued that the SEEs should not be privatized but reformed or rehabilitated. Tek Gıda-Is also suggested that workers could buy the shares of the SEEs through “employee stock ownership plans”. In contrast, Petrol-Is’s reaction is one of the strongest: while the union calls for a “general strike” against privatisation process, its leader, Munir Ceylan stated that “privatization is a democracy problem in Turkey because, if a few monopolist capitalists control economic activities, they would also control the social and democratic developments” (Petrol-Is 1989:13).

Finally, the reaction of TURK-IS against privatization is rather puzzling. While the general consultant to the TURK-IS president, Yildirim Koc, argues that “not only unions but also the welfare state is target” (Aydinlik, 27 Temmuz 1993), the council of TURK-IS presidents declares that “we should not hurry to fall in a position to indicate whether we are completely against privatization or not” (Cumhuriyet, 9 Kasim 1993). In the 15th general congress of TURK-IS, the executive committee stated that they would accept privatization, if workers were not affected (TURK-IS 1989, TURK-IS 1994).

It seemed that some members of TURK-IS were concerned about the need for unions to focus their attempts on influencing the form of privatization, rather than, opposing it. While Turk-Is does not seem to have made any strategic decision against the process, among member unions, however, the unity was provided in consideration of the possibility of lay-offs and losing members following privatization.

## Abbreviations

TURK-IS	Turkish Confederation of Trade Unions
Agac-Is	Wood and Lumber Workers Union
Bassisen	Banking and Insurance Employees
Belediye-Is	Municipal and General Workers’ Union
Demiryol-Is	Railway Workers’ Union
Deri-Is	Leather and Shoe Workers’ Union
Hava-Is	Airways Workers’ Union
Kristal-Is	Glass Workers’ Union
Petrol-Is	Petroleum, Oil and Chemical Workers’ Union
SEEs	State Economic Enterprises
Yol-Is	Construction and Building Workers’ Union

## Notes

- 1 For more detailed information about the role of SEEs in the development of Turkish economy see Korkut Boratav and Ergun Turkcan (1993), *Türkiye de sanayilesmenin yeni boyutlari ve KIT ler, İktisat politikasi secenekleri 1, Turk Tarihi Vakfi Yurt Yayinlari, İkinci baski, İstanbul.*
- 2 This information is based on a seminar organised by DISK/BANK SEN on 9th October 1993, during which academics like Prof Mumtaz Soysal, Prof İzzettin Onder, Prof Yakup Kepenek and journalist, Sukran Ketenci, expressed their opinions on the government's privatization programs.
- 3 In general there is a lack of union publications on union responses to the privatization programmes. However, among a few most useful publications see (Petrol-İs 1989) "Özelleştirme Üzerine"1, Aralık, İstanbul and (Hava-İs 1993) "Küreselleşme ve Özelleştirme" 15 Eylül İstanbul and also see Tek Gıda-İs (1993), Tek Gıda-İs Dergisi sayı 54, Deri-İs (1992) Deri-İs Sendikası 24. Olagan genel kurul çalışmaları raporu 3-4 Ekim 1992 İstanbul, Kristal-İs (1992) Kristal-İs sendikası 11. Genel kurul 24-25 Temmuz, İstanbul and finally Petrol-İs Sendikası 21. Merkez Genel Çalışma raporu.
- 4 Personal interview with Halil Yedibela (19 October 1993), a lawyer in the Petroleum, Chemical and Rubber workers' union (Petrol-İs).
- 5 Personal interview with the president of the Airways workers' union, Atilla Aycin (29 September 1993).
- 6 A total of 115 companies will be privatized in the next few years (İktisat 1994) İktisat Dergisi sayı 348 Nisan. The government has announced that 44 and 71 companies will be sold in 1994 and 1995 respectively. Out of these, the Ciller government has declared urgent privatization of ten large companies. Sumer Holding, Petkim, Petlas, Turban, Testas, Halic Tersanesi, Et balik, TZDK, DMO, Tekel in 1994 and thirteen other large companies, Yem Sanayi, Erdemir, Tupras, Petrol ofisi, THY, Turban, Havas, Deniz nakliyat, Ditas, Sumerbank, Etibank, TEK and PTT in 1995 (Petrol-İs 1994 — Petrol-İs dergisi Nisan.

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