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# Current Developments in School Education in Turkey: education 'reforms' and teacher trade union responses

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**ABSTRACT** Education 'reforms' have been accelerated in the last decade in Turkey. Teachers, as the main actors of the education system, have developed a variety of responses to the reforms implemented in the field of education, both individually and collectively. They give directions to the change process in education by means of their trade unions. The unions have played important roles in the generation and implementation of educational policies with the strategies that they have developed. This article aims to analyse current developments in school education in Turkey and teacher trade union responses against the 'reforms'. For this aim, firstly, the general structure of the education system in Turkey will be identified followed by an analysis of the neoliberal policies that are a feature of the Turkish system. Finally, teacher trade unions' attitudes, compliance and resistance towards the 'education reforms' will be addressed in the context of the local dynamics of Turkey.

## Introduction

In recent years Turkish education has experienced many changes. Although the 'reforms' are presented as a means of improving education and securing better social life conditions, in reality they have led to a redefinition of the meaning and goal of education and an increase in educational inequalities. It is not possible, however, to analyse the changes taking place in education by only focusing on education. While the wider economic crisis of capitalism has deepened, efforts have been made to eliminate the obstacles preventing the processes of capital accumulation, and these changes have had an impact on all social structures and processes, but in particular on education. Education 'reforms' have focused on two principal areas. The first of these is to focus on the reproduction of labour power linked to developments in the Turkish and

global economy. The purpose and functions of education have been restructured on the axis of reproduction of competitive, flexible labour power equipped with the necessary qualifications to meet the needs of global capital. Defining education as a new valorisation area for capital accumulation is the second focus. Thus, while on the one hand attempts to prevent the decrease in the total surplus value have been attempted by public funding cuts in areas such as education and health, on the other hand, education has become a new field for private sector investment. The teachers, who are the most basic actors of the education field, are expected to keep pace with this change process and even to be active agents of it.

The implementation of neoliberal policies globally allows us to understand how these policies have been experienced in different communities and to explore the ways in which people have struggled against them. In this way, it is also possible to see temporal and spatial similarities and differences between these changes because the implementation of the reforms sometimes varies depending on the local dynamics. The traditional features of the country/region, its constitutional order, and the organisation level of the society can all impact the change process. Education is an arena where struggles and conflicts are experienced between different social groups about how the education policies and the curriculum are shaped, how 'capacity for social practice' is developed, as Connell (1995) stated. Undoubtedly, this relationship develops unevenly, with those who hold power in their hands able to dictate the landscape. However, there is nothing inevitable about reform and struggles to challenge it can provide opportunities for delay, sometimes prevention and even reversal in the implementation. This is closely related with how education actors behave in an organised manner. The political actors having the potential to exhibit the most comprehensive struggle against the neoliberal transformation of education are the trade unions in which teachers are organised. However, trade unions have also been affected by this change process and reshaped on the axis of the new order. But at the same time they have organised resistance against neoliberal policies so that different social groups can obtain educational qualifications and demand education as a right. Therefore, it is important to reveal the responses of education unions against the 'reforms' which result in privatisation, commercialisation and loss of rights in different countries/regions. In this study, firstly, the general structure of the education system in Turkey will be identified and its main features outlined, then 'education reforms' implemented by neoliberal policies in Turkey, as in many parts of the world, will be discussed. Following this, trade unions' attitudes, compliance and resistance towards the 'education reforms' will be addressed. The last section will focus upon the lessons to be learned from Turkey based on the experiences of education unions in the country.

### **The National Context: a general overview of the education system in Turkey**

The education system in Turkey consists of two main parts, namely formal and non-formal education, and education activities are organised centrally by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). Formal education activities include pre-primary, basic education (primary and lower secondary), upper secondary and tertiary education (MoNE, 2014). Primary and secondary education presented in the 4+4+4 format for twelve years became compulsory for all citizens with legislation enacted in 2012. Non-formal education activities include apprenticeship training, public education and distance learning activities that meet the needs of individuals who have never entered the formal education system or are at any level of it or have left at that level (MoNE, 2010). The organisational structure of MoNE is composed of central, provincial and overseas organisations. The determination, planning, implementation and monitoring of national policies and strategies for all levels of education and training are carried out centrally by the MoNE. The curriculum in pre-primary, primary and secondary education is created centrally and education services are carried out in this context. The Board of Education, which is connected directly to the Ministry, develops curriculum plans and objectives, and approves textbooks. It also takes a lead in the preparation, examination and development of teachers' guidebooks. The highest advisory board guiding the activities of the MoNE is the National Council of Education, which convenes every four years. The representatives from ministries, public agencies and institutions, both domestic and foreign universities, professional associations, non-governmental organisations and the private sector are invited to the Council. The education and training activities are discussed in the National Council of Education and advisory decisions are taken. The Directorate for Strategy Development, the Directorate for Guidance and Inspection, the Directorate General for Innovation and Education Technologies and the Directorate General for European Union and Foreign Relations are other units of the MoNE. They coordinate the strategies, policies and goals of the MoNE. The Council of Higher Education (Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu [YÖK]) and its committees are responsible for higher education policies. Provincial organisation of the MoNE consists of provincial and district directorates of national education, and school and institution directorates. The directorates that consist of branch offices and departments provide the execution of educational services in the provinces and districts in accordance with the decisions of the central organisation. Schools have little autonomy to respond the local needs. The total number of students in the formal education system in Turkey is 17,532,988 according to 2013/14 National Education statistics. Private education institutions represent 10.8% of all formal education institutions. Although there are different school types in secondary education, there is a dual structure of general and vocational-technical secondary education. The number of schools in vocational and technical secondary education is approximately 60% of secondary education; however, the total ratio of students attending these schools is only 38% of total

secondary school students (MoNE, 2014). Vocational and technical education has been invested within the framework of policies to develop these institutions, but the number of students in vocational education has remained limited due to the social inequalities experienced in education. Some 9% of secondary students continue to religious schools called 'imam and preacher' high schools. The transitions to upper secondary education and higher education in Turkey are provided with centralised and standardised examinations. University entrance examinations are administered by the Assessment, Selection and Placement Centre (Öğrenci Seçme ve Yerleştirme Merkezi [ÖSYM]) working in coordination with the MoNE.

Education is largely publicly funded in Turkey, but schools can receive contributions from parents through their school-parent associations on the grounds that sufficient funding to meet needs cannot be provided. Private organisations can also make donations to the schools. Personnel and financial management of schools is the responsibility of central and provincial governments. The total expenditure provided by the state for primary and secondary education was 2.74% of GDP in 2010. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average expenditure for the same level of education was 3.8% in the same period (OECD, 2014). In 2012, it may be mentioned that there was a modest increase in the budget of the MoNE with the transition to 12-year compulsory education. The budget of the MoNE rose to 3.24% of GDP in 2014 (MoNE, 2014). A comprehensive study on the amount of private expenditure in the total education expenditure in Turkey was carried out in 2002 by the Turkish Statistical Institute (TürkStat, 2006). Private expenditure for educational services in Turkey in 2002 corresponded to 2.5% of GDP according to these results. Of education expenditure, 62.3% was financed from public sources, 33.4% from household income, and 1.9% from various associations, foundations and private companies, while the remaining 2.4% came from international organisations and other sources (World Bank, 2006, p. 104). A study based on household consumption demonstrates that private expenditure on education has increased by approximately 10% from 2002 to 2010 (Kaya Bahçe & Bahçe, 2012). According to the data provided by the Directorate for Strategy, the modest increase in education funding is far from adequate to meet the increasing demand for quality education parallel to rising population growth. Having not been given sufficient resources, schools have been trying to create their own resources and raise donations. This leads to an increase in inequality between schools, and a growing differentiation in what schools can offer. The parent contribution in schools located in areas with better socio-economic conditions can reach large amounts. The schools located in poor areas only benefit from funding provided by the central and local governments. Therefore one of the key factors that determines the quality of education received is socio-economic background (Buyruk, 2008; ERI, 2014).

While talking about formal education in Turkey, it is important to recognise the teachers, who are the main actors in the education system.

Teacher training institutions were connected to the universities in 1982 (YÖK, 2007). Primary school teacher education was included in education faculty departments of universities in 1992. The teacher candidates have to be successful in a central examination called the Public Personnel Selection Examination (PPSE) to be a teacher. A limited number of graduates are appointed every year. On the other hand, thousands of them are waiting to be employed. According to the statements made by the MoNE, more than one hundred thousand teachers are needed in different branches of education. Despite this situation, thousands of teachers are employed on casualised contracts on the grounds of resource shortages. The number of teachers within the formal education system is 873,747, with 10% of them working in private schools.

The establishment of trade unions for public servants in Turkey was formalised by a constitutional amendment in 1995 but the provisions for their implementation were made with the Public Servants' Trade Unions Law in 2001. A number of trade unions have been established in the education and science sector since that date. The name of the law was changed to 'Public Servants' Trade Unions and Collective Bargaining Law' in 2012, when collective bargaining rights were granted for public servants. However, 'collective bargaining' is not such a straightforward concept in Turkey and the rights it confers are very limited (Aydoğanoglu, 2014). The resolution of conflicts is left to the Arbitration Committee for Public Servants as part of a trade union law that does not include the right to strike. Nevertheless, there is significant progress in the application of 'collective bargaining', which had previously only had advisory status. Today, the trade unions having the most members of all public sector unions are in the education and science sector. Approximately half of the total number of unionised employees in the public sector is in education, training and science services. All teachers and civil servants who work in central and provincial organisations of the MoNE, in universities and various institutions which are in the education and science sector can be members of these trade unions. However, the majority of union members are teachers because their number is greater than the other officers and they have a history of being organised. Teachers and other employees working in private educational institutions may be members of trade unions. There are no less than 33 trade unions operating in the education and science sector in which public servants are organised. However, many of these unions are highly specialised and their membership is tiny. Although there is a large number of teacher trade unions, only three of them have more than 100,000 members. Within Turkey, the politics of these unions, and their relationship with the state and government, is highly significant. This is the subject of later discussion in this article.

## **Neoliberal Education Policies and the Implementation of 'Reforms' in Turkey**

The economic crisis of capitalism that began in the 1970s has been addressed by the state with policies that have sought to remove obstacles to capital accumulation. This has caused significant changes in all social structures and processes. On the one hand, the state has sought to cut expenditure on areas such as education and health; on the other hand, these areas have been seen as new valorisation opportunities for private capital (Ercan, 1998). The requirement for the expanded reproduction of capital has resulted in policies that lead to direct inclusion of many areas of social life, such as education, in the capital accumulation process. Educational processes are increasingly restructured on an axis of reproduction of competitive, flexible labour power equipped with the necessary qualifications to meet the needs of global capital (see Rikowski, 2002). The regulations introduced to accelerate this transformation of education in many regions of world are now widely recognised as a process of neoliberal restructuring. Under this heading of neoliberal restructuring it is possible to include policies of privatisation, cuts in public funding, new public management, restructuring of the curriculum, changes in working conditions of teachers, and de-unionisation, (Hursh, 2005; Hill, 2007). Although neoliberal policies implemented with the support of global actors to achieve the desired basic objectives have similarities at the global level, they can also vary depending on the local dynamics.

In Turkey, new economic policies were introduced towards the end of the 1970s to overcome the economic crisis, and these coincided with a restructuring process associated with the 1980 military coup. However, neoliberal restructuring of education in Turkey only really began in the mid 1990s, and has since gained great momentum with the AKP government since 2000. In this process, international organisations such as the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the OECD have played important roles. Commercialisation and privatisation practices in education, starting in the 1990s, have increased significantly in the last decade.

It should be noted that privatisation in education has some differences from the general practices of privatisation. Privatisation is usually used as a concept that refers to the transfer of the state-owned enterprises to private entrepreneurs but in education this is often more complex. On the one hand, efforts have been made to increase the share of private educational institutions in the education sector, but, on the other hand, wider 'commercialisation' has also been accelerated. For example, even within public education, more activities are carried out by private sub-contractors.

In Turkey, the regulations have been changed to increase the number of private schools. Hence, since 2002, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been trying to increase the share of private institutions in education. After coming to power, the party promised to make a certain amount of cash support available to students if they went to private schools, although this approach was not successful. In 2006, different regulations were introduced to

increase the incentives to capital groups that invest in private schools. In time the number of private courses, called *dershane* in Turkey, showed a large increase during the 10 years of AKP rule. *Dershanes* are private institutions that specialise in offering students ‘cramming’ courses for university entrance. In recent years, the government has sought to increase the share of private schools in the sector by taking advantage of the growing *dershane* market. As a result increased incentives were agreed for *dershanes* in 2014 if they converted into private schools offering both the standard curriculum and test preparation. The share of private schools is likely to substantially increase as a result of this development and in this way the government will be able to achieve its targets for private sector growth. Even if public schools are sufficient, parents are likely to choose the test preparation factory model in a system where the influence of testing is so dominant. Therefore, it is expected that the rate of students attending private schools will rise rapidly.

The government’s other way of supporting private educational institutions is through expanding ‘public–private partnership’ projects. What is now clear in Turkey is that the meanings of the concepts of ‘public’ and ‘private’ in education have changed. For example, private ‘education businesses’ have been opened with significant public resources. One such initiative is ‘educational campuses’ whereby the state will pay a rental fee annually to the company that builds the school (or ‘campus’), and all the services outside direct education such as security, cleaning, cafeteria, canteen are ‘contracted out’ for a period that can last up to 49 years (Eğitim-Sen, 2012). The policy has similarities with that of the Private Finance Initiative in the United Kingdom. For private capital, securing a return on the investment is virtually guaranteed. In Turkey, the construction of 33 ‘education campuses’ is already well under way.

Commercialisation and privatisation trends in all levels of education have gained momentum since 2002. The percentage of GDP allocated to the education system has not changed greatly since the AKP came to power. Moreover, the share of investment expenditure in the education budget has dropped considerably. Since the 1990s, the lack of resources for education investment has led to a decrease in the quality of public education. On the one hand, this situation leads parents to turn to private schools, and on the other, parents of students attending public schools have to make a larger contribution to the school funding. For example, the role of school–parent associations in financing education was enhanced with a circular issued in 2005. In this way fundraising at school was legalised and also these associations started to manage school canteens, parking areas and school halls together with the school administrators. ‘Hidden privatisation’, as described by Ball and Youdell (2007), has become commonplace in Turkey. Therefore, even when education is provided by the state, it can be commercialised in many forms with market forces introduced in multiple ways (see Aksoy, 2011; Polat, 2013).

One of the main changes resulting from these market-driven reforms has been experienced in the processes of management and administration. It is claimed that public services will become more efficient with the adoption of a

'flexible' and customer-oriented 'public management' model instead of traditional public administration based on 'hierarchical' and bureaucratic organisation. New public management (NPM) is based on the assumption that company-specific management methods and techniques can be applied to the public sector and in this way efficiency and effectiveness can be provided (Clarke et al, 2000). Such an approach assumes there should be no essential difference between administration approaches of public institutions and private companies. However, it represents much more than the application of particular management techniques. The expansion of such management techniques in the public field should be considered as the manifestation of a holistic transformation of the public sphere, not simply a technical issue.

A feature of NPM is a wider structural reform of education. According to Dempster et al (2001), these changes can be listed under several headings, including decentralisation of schools under the name of 'self-management', regulation of pre-service teacher training processes, determination of teacher performance based on employer choices, highlighting the school performance instead of public control, the centralisation of the curriculum and increasing surveillance of assessment systems. With these changes, certain rights that were previously available are lost. Important changes take place in the school culture and public service values are being replaced with market-driven ones.

However, decentralisation of education in Turkey has not been committed to entirely and has unfolded in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. The state remains deeply wedded to centralised control, but at the same time has tried to convey an impression of decentralisation. One way that decentralisation has been encouraged has been by increasing the role of school-parent associations on the basis of discussions about participation in administration but this also has the aim of increasing the role of parents in contributing to school funds. School-parent associations are generally composed of middle-class families (Yolcu, 2011; Sayılan & Türkmen, 2013). Working-class and poor families have a little chance to join these associations because they are unable to contribute to the school funds sufficiently. This situation deepens the differences and differentiation between schools in the same city (Ünal et al, 2010). Another element of this discourse relates to total quality management (TQM) as a further mechanism functioning in the change of administration processes in Turkey. TQM often creates a perception that there is a more democratic environment at school because it contains words that have positive meanings such as 'participation', 'democracy', or 'sharing' (Aydoğanoglu, 2003). But the goals of 'business' are configured on the axis of 'customer satisfaction' with TQM. The logic of the market, and the culture created by defining parents as customers have an important function in adapting teachers to a performative culture. NPM and TQM allow the creation of an 'entrepreneurial culture' in which both the heart and the mind of employees is captured by the managers to achieve the intended results (Hatcher, 1994; Ball, 1998). TQM began to be rapidly implemented in the educational field in Turkey by World Bank-funded projects at the end of the 1990s and its popularity appears to have declined only a little



recently. However, it has always been present during this time and has created slow but profound transformations in school culture.

The drive to 'privatisation', 'flexibility', 'deregulation', 'performance evaluation' and 'managerialism', which has been seen in the supply of public services in Turkey since the 1980s, has been accelerated in the last decade and has been widely expanded in education. Decrees are the major tools of the AKP government to drive through these changes. One such decree, called the 'Regulation on Advancement at Career Ladders for Teachers', was published in 2005 and the Advancement at Career Ladders for Teachers examination was introduced based on the decree (the examination acts as a rationing device for teacher promotion). This created a hierarchical structure among teachers, as in England (see Gray & Whitty, 2010). This process can be seen as a pre-application of a performance model. However, it can be argued that this hierarchical structuring has not been well accepted in Turkey and as yet it has not created divisions between teachers.

Education and science, functioning like money in capitalist production conditions, have been seen as tools to provide income and status, so they are commodified. This has led to the expansion of standardised tests that provide entry to the upper education institutions and hence professions. Standardised tests function as an important mechanism for the expansion of competitive and enterprising culture. In addition to this, they lead to increased control over teachers by providing a measurement of their performance. In Turkey, the effect of standardised tests that were introduced in the 1980s has increased at all levels of education starting from elementary school through to senior years. Transitions between stages from primary to tertiary education are based on these tests. Today they have meanings beyond the function of sifting in Turkey. Test mechanisms have become a major industry, together with *dershanes* and other private courses as mentioned previously, and are now a key source of capital accumulation in their own right.

One of the fundamental transformations of the education system in Turkey took place in the curriculum in 2004. A more flexible curriculum was created on the basis of neoliberal values such as entrepreneurship, career planning and conscious consumerism (İnal, 2005). The development of 'human capital', and improving qualified labour power, were defined as open targets and were intended to equip individuals with the skills appropriate for the labour market, rather than for their holistic development. Primary and secondary education curricula have been prepared centrally since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. These programmes have undergone various changes in the historical process, but they have retained this feature. Now a much tighter control has been developed over curriculum and teaching.

Various regulations have been applied to teacher training, teachers' employment and working conditions since the 1990s, when neoliberal policies expanded. Teacher training programmes have been restructured with the World Bank-funded projects. Various undergraduate programmes of educational sciences were closed and the process of teacher training was given a more

technical structure (Özsoy & Ünal, 2005). The regulations in administration processes, curriculum, measurement and evaluation have led to various changes in the labour process of teaching. As well as this, a variety of changes in the employment and working conditions of teachers have been introduced. In Turkey, teachers are largely employed as permanent civil servants within the framework of Law 657. However, during the 2000s, like other public employees, some teachers began to be employed as contracted employees and paid within the context of flexible employment policies applied in service sectors of the state. Contracted teaching was abolished *de facto* in 2011. However, casualised teaching offering precarious conditions has continued. Approximately 100,000 [1] teachers continue to work for only a course fee with no security or benefits. This is a level of pay virtually the same as the minimum wage. These teachers cannot benefit from employee personal rights, as do permanent teachers. A large proportion of assisted services in schools is provided by temporary staff employed by subcontractors. The changes in the labour process of teaching have led to a depreciation and deskilling of teachers' work within the framework of the logic of capital accumulation.

One of the fundamental reforms that has been implemented recently in Turkey is the introduction of compulsory education to 12 years referred to as the regulation of 4+4+4. The process of compulsory education has been divided into three stages as primary, lower secondary and upper secondary by the amendment in the Education and Training Act in 2012. In this way, students will be able to go to imam and preacher schools that provide religious education after the first stage. Students have been directed to vocational and religious high schools without their consent with the application of Transition from Basic to Secondary Education (TEOG). So, the share of technical vocational and religious schools in secondary education is being increased. Students who do not prefer these schools are forced to turn to the private schools because it is necessary to be successful in TEOG to go to Anatolian high schools where general education is provided. In fact, the opening and the expansion of imam and preacher schools, making lessons in religious culture compulsory, are post-1980 developments, but this tendency was dropped after moving to the eight-year compulsory education system in 1997. Religious courses in the secondary education curriculum have been expanded with the regulation of 4+4+4 and this represents a significant Islamification of Turkish schooling in a society with a proud secular tradition. The teachings of other faiths and denominations are given very little space in the new courses. As a result, the rise of neoliberal policies, the privatisation and commercialisation of education and the rise of a specific religious orientation in education are parallel developments in Turkey.

### **The Union Responses: reformism or resistance**

It is important to briefly explain the historical development of trade unions in the field of education and their relationship with the state to reveal how they

have responded to the neoliberal attacks described in this article. The history of teacher organisations in Turkey dates back very many years. *Encümen-i Muallimin* (Teachers' Association), which was founded in 1908, is acknowledged as the first teacher organisation (Akyüz, 1970), though trade union organisations were not allowed during the period of single-party government, from establishment of the Republic to the year of 1946. While the establishment of trade unions for workers was allowed from 1947, civil servants were excluded and the establishment of teachers' trade unions was prevented (Gülmez, 2002). However, teachers have been organised in various associations to improve personal rights and find solutions for their problems since about that date. During this time unionisation took place in quite limited ways. The Teachers' Union of Turkey (TÖS), which was active from 1965 to 1971, and achieved considerable popularity, had a special place in this experience. During the 1980s teachers were organised under the umbrella of associations but it was not until 1990 that more conventional teacher unions began to develop (Altunya, 1998). Various trade unions began to be established in the field of education from that time. Education trade unions today are the continuation of established teachers' associations from the 1970s. These associations were separated according to their political approaches. Therefore, today's education trade unions have been divided largely on the basis of political approaches.

One of the three major trade unions in the education sector in Turkey is the Education, Science and Culture Workers' Union (Eğitim-Sen) that was formed with the integration of Eğitim-İş and Eğitim-Sen, both founded in 1990, which are the successors of TÖS. One of the other two unions is the Turkish Education and Science Services Public Employees' Union (Türk-Eğitim-Sen) that represents the nationalist tradition, and the other one is the Educators' Trade Union (Eğitim-Bir-Sen), which has a close relationship with the government and represents a conservative-religious tradition. Most of the teachers are the members of these trade unions, which are also organised in the form of confederations with the other public civil servants' trade unions. Membership numbers of the three major education unions are as follows: Eğitim-Bir-Sen: 279,722, Türk-Eğitim-Sen: 230,994 and Eğitim-Sen: 129,259 (MoLSS, 2014). Eğitim-İş, parted from Eğitim-Sen, is the fourth largest trade union with 41,050 members and has a neo-nationalist line.

The division of teacher trade unions on the basis of their political approaches is a determining factor in their attitudes towards the general policies and educational reforms. Although it seems that there is a division in the form of left and right wing approaches, we can evaluate the development of the right-wing trade unions in the context of 'reform unionism' showing great expansion recently. 'Reform unionism' based on consensus between employer and trade unions on the framework of 'common interests' and 'social cohesion' is rapidly on the rise (Koppich, 2006; Stevenson, 2007). These unions support government policies and are actively involved in the implementation of the 'reforms'. According to Torres et al (2000), the new era that the trade unions have entered can be called 'professional unionism'. Therefore, a complementary

relationship between 'new unionism' and a 'new professionalism' has been established.

It is possible to classify the responses of trade unions to neoliberal transformations under three basic approaches depending on the existing union divisions in Turkey. The first of these is Eğitim-Bir-Sen's approach, which can be called 'reform unionism'. Eğitim-Bir-Sen, which is the largest teachers' trade union in Turkey, now acts together with the government and plays an important role in the implementation of educational reforms. Eğitim-Bir-Sen and the confederation to which it is affiliated, Memur-Sen, expanded its membership by about 1500% since AKP came to power in 2002. This trade union functions to legitimate government policies on the one hand, but also seeks to improve the positions of its members on the other. For that reason, the employees who want to be administrators (head teacher) or profit from a variety of interests tend to join this trade union. Some of its members are also attracted by its neo-conservative ideological approach. Memur-Sen, for example, has not been accepted as a member by the International Trade Union Confederations such as ITUC and ETUC so far (Çelik, 2014). It plays an active role in the development and acceptance of proposals for the reforms in the Council of National Education, which dominates education policies in Turkey. For example, reforms such as the measurement of teacher competence and performance evaluation are among the recommendations of Eğitim-Bir-Sen. This authorised trade union in the education and science sector proposed low wage increases by following a path of reconciliation with the government and this approach has been met with a huge backlash by other unions. The general president of Eğitim-Bir-Sen, which has a direct and organic link with AKP, has resigned from public service in order to be a deputy to the government party in the general elections to be held in 2015.

The second largest union, Türk-Eğitim-Sen, has been able to secure the appointment of its members to ministry units and executive positions in schools and has followed policies directed to protect their interests. It developed good relationships with the right-wing governments in power in the 1990s and acted in accordance with the government policies. Although it has exhibited a more oppositional stance lately, it cannot be said that it is in contradiction to the neoliberal policies in general. Sometimes it has supported these policies and made an effort for their successful implementation; sometimes it has used a nationalist rhetoric and opposed these policies.

The trade union that expresses most radical criticism of the neoliberal policies and maintains a stance against the reforms is Eğitim-Sen. The rise and massification of Eğitim-Sen that began in the 1990s has grown out of the resistance and the line of struggle that it has developed against the neoliberal policies. However, the number of members of Eğitim-Sen has not increased as quickly as other unions. One of the reasons for this situation is that these trade unions acquired a legal status which then resulted in a pragmatic trade unionism with government support. Another reason is that there have been sharp debates within Eğitim-Sen on the basis of ideological differences. But the trade union

that produces holistic policies against the transformation process, and raises the struggle against the government of AKP, which is the carrier of neoliberal policies, is Eđitim-Sen. The responses of Eđitim-Sen to the neoliberal education policies can be classified under several headings. The first of these is carrying out legal challenges in accordance with the possibilities offered by the law, although using the law against negative acts and regulations is also one of the main strategies that the other trade unions follow to protect the personal rights of employees and to oppose some reforms. Another form of struggle is to build alliances with the community by using the press and other communication tools. Public statements, which are usually delivered to reveal the attitude of the trade unions on specific issues, can sometimes develop into a massive action. Another method adopted is strikes and protests and it is common to extend an invitation to other components of the school community, such as parents, to join the action. This method has been used considerably lately, and there is some evidence that mass participation is beginning to diminish. Of course, it should be noted that the harsh behaviour of police against teachers who are members of Eđitim-Sen is an important obstacle in their struggles. Many members of Eđitim-Sen have been taken into custody, even arrested because of their trade union activities and it is difficult to overestimate how the huge power of the state has been used to try to crush dissent.

It can be said that Eđitim-Sen has a long-term commitment to struggle against the neoliberal reforms (Eđitim-Sen, 2014). Preparing and publishing booklets against neoliberal education policies, training union representatives and organising conferences and congresses are important for the development of basic strategies against the current policies. In addition to these tactics, school visits to build campaigns are also important forms of struggle. For example, many teachers did not enter the performance examination as part of a union campaign against the 'Regulation on Advancement at Career Ladders for Teachers'. Eđitim-Sen carried out a campaign against this development and in this way many of its members were prevented from entering the examination. However the other trade unions organised courses for their members to succeed in the examination.

The strategies, tactics and actions that teacher trade unions develop against the reforms implemented in education take place on the basis of their differing approaches to struggle and resistance. They can sometimes tend towards different actions on the same subject and they seldom act together. For example, one of the main problems of the education system is the employment of casualised teachers whose work is precarious and the different strategies of teacher unions can be seen in relation to this issue. All the different unions have campaigned on this issue and made public statements against casualised work but their actions were held in separate locations or on different days. For example, Eđitim-Sen and Türk-Eđitim-Sen both undertook strike action to address the problems of casualised work but they did not coordinate their action.

The trade unions have different attitudes to the reform of 4+4+4 that brings significant changes in the education system. While Eğitim-Bir-Sen has supported this reform, Eğitim-Sen has opposed it completely and Türk-Eğitim-Sen has objected to some parts of it.[2] According to Eğitim-Sen, the aims of the government are to re-form the education system based on religious differences, weaken public education and strengthen private education, transferring state resources to the private schools (Eğitim-Sen, 2014). Protests have been made in many parts of the country, and effective actions have been carried out against the conversion of some schools into imam and preacher schools. The conversion of some schools has been prevented and strong public opinion has been created with a coming together of parents, teachers and students in these actions. However in the 19th National Education Council, recommendations for the continuation of 4+4+4 reform, including increasing the ratio of religious courses in the curriculum, were taken with the support of Eğitim-Bir-Sen. Eğitim-Sen was not invited to participate in the preparatory work of the Council and was represented in the final Council by only four members. A boycott took place on 13 February with Eğitim-Sen and other oppositional organisations campaigning for scientific, secular and mother tongue education, but it ended, as is common, with police interventions and custodies. This experience highlights the clear position of the Turkish state and the way in which it has colluded with some teacher unions to promote its agenda of neoliberal reform and neo-conservative religious regulation.

### **Conclusion: some notes on the lessons to be learned from Turkey**

The reproduction of the social system is one of the main functions of education in capitalist societies. However, education has the potential to play a role in the creation of an equitable society and to be an emancipatory process. It can be a process of empowerment which allows students to explore both the world and themselves and provides them autonomy at the same time. Therefore education can be defined as an arena where struggles, conflicts and contradictions take place on how to improve the 'capacity for social practice'. While the purpose and functions of education are redefined depending on the changing capitalist relations with neoliberal interventions, the practical contexts of schooling have been changing rapidly. Education is defined as a new valorisation area for capital accumulation on the one hand, while on the other its function in the reproduction of the necessary labour power is highlighted. While the role and functions of the teachers who are expected to keep pace with the reform process have been redefined, their employment and working conditions have been attacked and commodified. Teachers as the main actors of the educational process develop a variety of responses to this transformation process, both individually and collectively. The teachers as organised workers in many countries of the world give directions to the change process by means of their trade unions. The functions of the trade unions in the field of education,

however, are different from the other trade unions and are not limited to wage bargaining and the rights of their members. Because education is a political arena, this leads teacher unions to take part in shaping the policies implemented in the field of education as political actors. The shaping of these policies cannot be disconnected from the teacher unions' positions in relation to the government and the state.

As Stevenson and Carter (2009) emphasise, a 'partnership' which is fractured from time to time is formed between the state and teachers both individually and collectively. Historically, teacher unions have been developed in the shadow of the state in Turkey. When they come into a conflicting position with the state, they have generally been faced with being challenged or even banned. Under these circumstances, and faced with such repression, it is perhaps not surprising that a more timid form of 'reform unionism' has gained in popularity. At the beginning of the 1990s a rapid increase took place in unionism, showing resistance to the unpopular reforms, and this union tendency has also played an important role in the formation of social policies as well as education policies. However, government forces responded by sponsoring their own unions from the second half of the 1990s as they responded to the counter-hegemonic challenge created by Eğitim-Sen. Eğitim-Bir-Sen, which is known to be close to the government, has increased the number of its members quickly and gained strength with the rise of AKP, which has been in power for the past decade. In this sense, as Stevenson (2007) noted, a social partnership has been established between the government and this union. Education reforms were implemented quickly with the support and legitimising role of Eğitim-Bir-Sen. During this government, public servant unionism was given a legal status and various rights such as collective bargaining were obtained. But these rights are extremely limited with no genuine autonomy. AKP has followed a policy of creating a trade union which acts together with the government and functions to legitimate government reforms. The state has enlarged unionisation in the sector of education, but strictly under its hegemony.

Because the focus of opposition developed by the unions is often on the religious and cultural dimensions, rather than class demands, some divisions take place both between unions and within unions. Political preference and ideological approaches play an important role in the unionisation and trade union choice of public employees. Increasing conservatism in Turkey has influenced the public bureaucracy and also the unions in this area. This has led to strengthening of Eğitim-Bir-Sen, feeding from the same ideological roots of the AKP government. Türk-Eğitim-Sen, with its nationalist politics, is more complex, but has a similar relation with the government and it too has benefited from this patronage. Although Eğitim-Sen has experienced some increase in the number of its members, it cannot be said that it has grown significantly. In the face of an extremely hostile government, and a powerful state apparatus, the most progressive union has struggled to retain its forward momentum. State repression, punishment of its members in various ways and the union's deliberate marginalisation by the government are obstacles to development. It is

also important to recognise other reasons why Eğitim-Sen has found it difficult to develop an effective opposition line. The failure to create and sustain a strong organisation in the workplace and the disconnections between union officials and members are among the basic weaknesses of this trade union (Eğitim-Sen, 2014). Rapid action decisions have been taken in recent years and the members could not always take part in decision-making processes sufficiently. These problems have been compounded by ideological divisions and the failure to reach out to all of the employees, and focusing on cultural/religious demands instead of class ones has resulted in a narrowing of the union's base. In summary, not enough solutions to the problems of members at the workplace level have been generated. This has led to a power loss in Eğitim-Sen as it has struggled to retain its influence as an effective opposition against neoliberal reforms. A trade union line which is freed from cultural and ideological separations, and which focuses on challenging the neoliberal attacks to Turkish public education is required. What is important is that teachers and educators are seen as part of the wider trade union struggle but that students and parents should also be able to participate in the union campaigns. In this way a wider movement of struggle can be developed against precarity, privatisation, inadequate wages and the attack on Turkish public education.

### Notes

- [1] The total number of paid teachers is not known because they are employed by the provincial offices of MoNE temporarily. According to the information obtained from the governors by Türk-Eğitim-Sen in an official way, 71,916 paid teachers are working in 69 cities. The figures for the other 12 cities are not known.
- [2] These assessments are based on trade unions' press releases, newsletters and publications in the framework of the process.

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