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## Constructing new Turkey's desired worker: the denial of social class in the AKP era

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### ABSTRACT

The process of intensification of authoritarianism in Turkey was characterized by the attempt to monopolize state power and marginalize the opposition. At the same time, however, the intensity of authoritarianism extended beyond the institutional level of the state and decisively affected many levels of social relations. This article analyses one of the many expressions of the relationship between authoritarianism and neoliberalism at social class level and the attempt to construct a disciplined working class committed to the state's strategies. It focuses on the analysis of the content of 'desired worker' and 'desired trade unionism' which the AKP government tries to impose, aiming to intensify control over sections of labourers. Analysing the content of social class, but even more specifically the content the government aims to attribute to the concept of working class and trade unionism, this study contributes towards a more general understanding of the development of authoritarianism. Decoding the different perceptions and ways the Erdoğan government exploits them in order to shed them of their class content, this article aims at a better comprehension of power mechanisms and mechanisms reproducing social inequality.

### Introduction

'I think that even the words capital and labour are wrong. Labour and capital, as well as investment, production and consumption, are all human products. If man exists, labour, production, investment and consumption exist ... And if this is so, then we should strengthen the human beings'.<sup>1</sup> This extract from Erdoğan's speech at the 10th Conference of Turkey's Labour Council is one of the many characteristic examples of denial of the class aspect of society. The denial of class aspects and antagonisms between social classes is not a new phenomenon in Turkey.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it constitutes one of the key aspects for the reproduction of authoritarianism, as manifested today at world-wide. This is just one example of the many which place the case of Turkey within the broader global context of relevance between authoritarianism and neoliberalism. A central aspect of the neoliberal state is the dual function of exclusion of organized labour

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<sup>1</sup>Çalışma ve Sosyal Güvenlik Bakanlığı, 10. Çalışma Meclisi, 26–27 Eylül 2013 (Ankara: Miki Matbaacılık, 2013) 18.

<sup>2</sup>Ahmet Makal, *Ameleden İşçiyse. Erken Cumhuriyet Dönemi Emek Tarihi Çalışmaları* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2007).

from the decision-making process and its disciplining to the economic sphere.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, neoliberalism carries authoritarian elements, which in relation to the working class are expressed around two axes: On the one hand the state seeks to insulate specific political decisions from the democratic control and reactions of social opposition.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the state is oriented towards the adoption of regulations which contribute to the atomization of labour legislation and the weakening of collective bargaining.<sup>5</sup> In this way, the dynamic of authoritarian denial of the class aspect of society by the state power, is further reinforced. As in the case of other countries, so in Turkey the perceptions of social differentiation that deny the importance of social classes often result in a static and top-down perception of social structure,<sup>6</sup> reproducing the social hierarchy in an authoritarian context.

Turkey's experience, especially since 1980, has been characterized by the ruling powers' persistent attempts to diminish the importance of social class as collective identity and foremost as basis for collective political activity.<sup>7</sup> The process of neoliberal transformation challenged labour as a separate collective identity. At the same time, however, the disappearance of labour as a collegiality contributed to the disappearance of an analytical basis for alienation and exploitation of—and prospect of cooperation among—the labour masses.<sup>8</sup> The main aim was to put an end to class-oriented political activity through the creation of new social identities.<sup>9</sup> However, this trend was neither general nor abstract. The aim was to restrict the class orientation of the social opposition and especially the workers' organizational structures.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the bid for wider social conservatism through the strengthening of identity politics weakened the class basis of trade unionism.<sup>11</sup>

The Turkish case can be included in a wider group of states in Europe and elsewhere that had sought to transform the already problematic state of democratic institutions and had proceeded with further weakening of any chances for massive democratic demands by organized groups of labourers.<sup>12</sup> The AKP essentially continued with the authoritarian methods of weakening popular participation and politicization that had emerged since the early stages of neoliberal change in the country.<sup>13</sup> Notable research on the authoritarian aspects of AKP policy in labour relations has so far, among other things, revealed

<sup>3</sup>Nilgün Önder, *The Economic Transformation of Turkey: Neoliberalism and State Intervention* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016) 1.

<sup>4</sup>Werner Bonefeld, *The Strong State and the Free Economy* (London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017).

<sup>5</sup>Mónica Clua-Losada and Olatz Ribera-Almadoz, 'Authoritarian Neoliberalism and the Disciplining of Labour' in *States of Discipline. Authoritarian Neoliberalism and the Contested Reproduction of Capitalist Order*, ed. Cemal Burak Tansel (London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017) 29–45.

<sup>6</sup>Stanley Aronowitz, *How Class Works. Power and Social Movement* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003) 8.

<sup>7</sup>Galip Yalman, 'Türkiye'de devlet ve burjuvazi: Alternatif bir okuma denemesi', in *Sürekli Kriz Politikaları: Türkiye'de sınıf, İdeoloji ve Devlet*, eds. Neşecan Balkan and Sungur Savran (İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2004) 69–70.

<sup>8</sup>Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos. Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015) 38.

<sup>9</sup>Bülent Küçük and Buket Türkmen, 'Remaking the Public through the Square: Invention of the New National Cosmology in Turkey', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 47, no. 2 (2020): 252.

<sup>10</sup>Galip Yalman, 'Politics and Discourse under the AKP's Rule: The Marginalization of Class-based Politics, Erdoğanisation, and Post-secularism', in *Silent Violence. Neoliberalism, Islamist Politics and the AKP Years in Turkey*, eds. Simten Coşar and Gamze Yücesan-Özdemir (Ottawa: Red Quill Books, 2012) 23.

<sup>11</sup>Efe Can Gürcan and Berk Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) 119.

<sup>12</sup>Didem Özkiziltan, 'Authoritarian Neoliberalism in AKP's Turkey: an Industrial Relations Perspective', *Industrial Relations Journal* 50, no. 3 (2019): 219.

<sup>13</sup>Sümercan Bozkurt-Güngen, 'Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities Under the AKP Governments in Turkey', *South European Society and Politics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 219–20.

the continuation and strengthening of an authoritarian–neoliberal legislative framework; the more stringent exclusion of class-oriented trade unions from decision-making processes; the discipline of labourers through their individualization; their integration into the financial system<sup>14</sup> and their dependency on consumer loans<sup>15</sup>; their transformation to social welfare recipients<sup>16</sup>; the creation of a huge network of clientelist relations,<sup>17</sup> and the continuation of the political repression of strikes or other workers' mobilizations.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, another key element of the AKP government was the strategy for hegemony in the trade union movement. At this level, the government's goal was not an outright attack on trade unions and the idea of trade unionism in general. On the contrary, the main goal was the transformation of trade unionism itself, so as to be able to control it.<sup>19</sup> At this point AKP strategy presents strong elements of a more general corporatist thinking. Corporatism, in its various forms,<sup>20</sup> is a useful analytical category for the comprehension of relations between state and social classes. This is not about a technical process, but a dynamic political process, which, under specific circumstances, can support the capital accumulation model and impede the development of subversive dynamics by organized labour.<sup>21</sup> Leo Panitch stresses that corporatism, which appears both in liberal as well as in authoritarian contexts of capitalist development, contributes to the influence of the state on interest groups, but also, to the mobilization of these groups as social control actors towards their members.<sup>22</sup> Despite the different perceptions within corporatism, some important common ideological elements have been historically recorded. One of the most important is the perception of class harmony and organic unity which should characterize a society. As Antonio Costa Pinto points out, at the epicentre of organic unity, which the corporatist thought promotes, stands the *homo corporativus* the model of a labourer mobilized only by the ideals of national values and goals.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the dominant feature of corporatist orientation was the attempt to marginalize organized labour and class-orientated unions through their assimilation to the state.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Fuat Ercan and Şebnem Oğuz, 'Understanding the Recent Rise of Authoritarianism in Turkey in Terms of the Structural Contradictions of the Process of Capital Accumulation' in *Turkey's New State in the Making. Transformations in Legality, Economy and Coercion*, eds. Pınar Bedirhanoglu, Çağlar Dölek, Funda Hülügü, Özlem Kaygusuz (London: Zed Books, 2020), 106.

<sup>15</sup>Ümit Akçay, 'Authoritarian Consolidation Dynamics in Turkey', *Contemporary Politics* (2020): DOI: 10.1080/13569775.2020.1845920; Mehmet Erman Erol, 'State and Labour under AKP Rule in Turkey: An Appraisal', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 21, no. 6 (2019): 663–77.

<sup>16</sup>Umut Bozkurt, 'Neoliberalism with a Human Face: Making Sense of the Justice and Development Party's Neoliberal Populism in Turkey', *Science & Society* 77, no. 3 (2013): 372–96; Yonca Özdemir, 'AKP's Neoliberal Populism and Contradictions of New Social Policies in Turkey', *Contemporary Politics* 26, no. 3 (2020): 245–267.

<sup>17</sup>Didem Özkiziltan, 'Authoritarian Neoliberalism in AKP's Turkey', 223.

<sup>18</sup>Mert Arslanalp and T. Deniz Erkmen, 'Repression without Exception: A Study of Protest Bans during Turkey's State of Emergency (2016–2018)', *South European Society and Politics* 25, no. 1 (2020): 99–125.

<sup>19</sup>Efe Can Gürcan and Berk Mete, *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism*, 109–111.

<sup>20</sup>Philippe C. Schmitter, 'Still the Century of Corporatism?', *The Review of Politics* 36, no 1 (1974): 85–131; Nilgün Önder, *The Economic Transformation of Turkey*, 6.

<sup>21</sup>Bob Jessop, 'Corporatism, Parliamentarism, and Social Democracy' in *Trends Towards Corporatist Intermediation*, eds. Philippe C. Schmitter and Gerhard Lehmbuch (London: SAGE, 1979) 185–212.

<sup>22</sup>Leo Panitch, 'The Development of Corporatism in Liberal Democracies' in *Working Class Politics in Crisis. Essays on Labour and the State*, ed. Leo Panitch (London: Verso, 1986) 136.

<sup>23</sup>Antonio Costa Pinto, 'Corporatism and "organic representation" in European dictatorships' in *Corporatism and Fascism. The Corporatist Wave in Europe*, ed. Antonio Costa Pinto (London and New York: Routledge, 2017) 5.

<sup>24</sup>Antonio Costa Pinto, 'Corporatism and "organic representation"', 6–7.

Within this theoretical context, one of the most important AKP policies was the construction of conservative trade-unionism, through the instigation of cultural polarization and the authoritarian construction of the 'authentic nation'.<sup>25</sup> In fact, as Galip Yalman points out, the exploitation of identity politics in a way that marginalizes the class orientation of the social opposition can be considered as the greatest success of the ruling bloc in Turkey during the period of AKP government.<sup>26</sup> Through a complex network of political and ideological tools, the AKP government sought to create the basis for the emergence of an amenable labour force<sup>27</sup> and hence a mass of labourers committed to the government's political programme.

Thus, the main theme of this article is to analyse AKP's aversion to the concept of social class, especially the working class, as an authoritarian option for the control of labourers and their demands. It should be noted that a government's efforts to restrict the chances of damage to its hegemony by the demands of a class-oriented labour movement are many and complex. In this respect, this study cannot be considered as complete since, due to limited space, it focuses on certain key aspects of the process of ideological and political construction of the 'desired worker' and the display of 'desired trade unionism' as an apparatus for the reproduction of the AKP government's social vision.

This study seeks to complement earlier prominent research that dealt with the authoritarian management of labour relations by the AKP government. It focuses on the denial of class society through culturalisation<sup>28</sup> of the working class itself, i.e. through the removal of the class characteristics from the social status of labourers. It seeks to study the process of ideological construction of the 'desired worker and trade unionism', focusing on Hak-İş (The Confederation of Righteous Trade Unions) and its relationship with AKP. This article thereby reinstates the importance of the concept of social class and how it is handled in the context of an authoritarian–neoliberal administration. Focusing on the AKP's attempts to deny the class aspects of the labour movement may contribute to understanding of the wider function of polarization in society and the demonization of social opposition,<sup>29</sup> as well as the exposure of power mechanisms that reinforce social inequality through the transformation of the concept of trade unionism.

Utilizing primary sources and materials from Hak-İş, the AKP and the Turkish state, as well as sources from the Turkish press, this research is divided into three main parts. The first part analyses the historic continuity of the perceptions of Turkish Islamism on the class structure of society and associates it to the political positions expressed by AKP on the same issue. Through the grid of continuity and discontinuity the ideological and political construction of the 'desired worker' as member of the authentic nation of New Turkey is identified, as well as the role he/she should be assigned, and the organizational form, which is 'desired trade unionism'.

<sup>25</sup>İlker Ataç and Joachim Becker, 'Turkey: The Politics of National Conservatism', *Austrian Journal of Development Studies* XXXII, no. 1–2 (2016): 16; Bülent Küçük and Buket Türkmen, 'Remaking the Public through the Square', 261.

<sup>26</sup>Galip Yalman, 'Politics and Discourse', 23.

<sup>27</sup>Didem Özkiziltan, 'Authoritarian Neoliberalism in AKP's Turkey', 230.

<sup>28</sup>Sedef Arat-Koç, 'Culturalizing Politics, Hyper-politicizing "Culture": "White" vs. "Black Turks" and the Making of Authoritarian Populism in Turkey', *Dialectical Anthropology* 42, no. 4 (2018): 391–408.

<sup>29</sup>Sedef Arat-Koç, 'Rethinking Whiteness, "Culturalism", and the Bourgeoisie in the Age of Neoliberalism', in *Theorizing Anti-Racism. Linkages in Marxism and Critical Race Theories*, eds. Abigail B. Bakan and Enakshi Dua (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 312.

The second part of the study analyses the functioning of Hak-İş as the epitome of the 'ideal workers' organization'. At this level, the study highlights the ideological aspects of the particular model of trade unionism the confederation promotes, but at the same time links this model to the process of reproduction of the government's social vision among the masses of workers. Finally, the third part of the research highlights the dialectic relationship between the construction of desired trade unionism and the demonization of class-oriented trade union activity. This part mainly concerns the analysis of the tools activated for the transformation of class trade union activism into the 'antagonistic other' through different political and ideological practices. Among such practices, the encouragement and reinforcement of mass conservative trade unionism in conjunction with repression of any other trade union activity stand out.

### **The Islamic classless society, the amenable labourer and desired trade unionism**

'There is nothing worse for a (religious) community than class conflict. Communists seek to create it, while western capitalists cannot eliminate it ... Islam considers all Muslims, workers and employers as brothers'.<sup>30</sup> This extract from a text by Islamist intellectual Abdülvehhab Öztürk, published in the mid-1980s, comprehensively describes the perception of a section of the Turkish Islamic Movement of the class structure of society. This perception continues to this day. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stressed, when talking to the Labour Council Conference in 2019, that 'In our culture there is no room for the division of society into classes according to the form of work of each person. There is no room for exploitation of their conflict and development of ideologies from such conflicts. If in the factory, worker and employer meet at the same fasting table (iftar), if they pray on the same side in the mosque and if they lie in the same row in the cemetery, then from a moral point of view there are no separate social classes'.<sup>31</sup> One thing that stands out in this extract is the rejection of class conflict.

A dominant view in Turkish Islamism, which continued under AKP rule, is that the class struggles and conflict which appeared in Turkey were the result of authoritarian westernization.<sup>32</sup> The process of westernization caused alienation from genuine cultural values, imposed egotism in social relations, challenged Ottoman solidarity and the most fundamental aspect of social peace.<sup>33</sup> As Erdoğan himself stressed, 'We belong to a civilisation which approaches the question of rights not through conflict but through consensus. This is where we differ the most from the West. They built social peace through conflict, while we rely on consensus'.<sup>34</sup> At the heart of the aforementioned nostalgia for the Ottoman 'golden era', *Ahi*, a form of trade union organization, was idolized as an integrated model of absorption of social conflict and cooperation among the different

<sup>30</sup>Yıldırım Koç, 'Şeriatçılar ve İşçi Hakları', *Mürekkep*, (1994): 53.

<sup>31</sup>'Çalışma Meclisi'nin 12. Toplantısı'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma', *TCCB*, 23.5.2019, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/105531/calisma-meclisi-nin-12-toplantisi-nda-yaptiklari-konusma>

<sup>32</sup>Mustafa Ammar Kılıç, 'İslamcılığın Emek Söylemi. İslamcı Dergilerde Kapitalizm ve Sosyal Adalet Tartışmaları (1984–97)', in *'Bir Başka Hayata Karşı'. 1980 sonrası İslamcı dergilerde meseleler, kavramlar ve isimler. Vol. 2: Tarih, Siyaset, İktisat*, ed. Lütfi Sunar (İstanbul: İslamcı Dergiler Projesi, 2019), 638.

<sup>33</sup>Burhanettin Duran and Engin Yıldırım, 'Islamism, Trade Unionism and Civil Society: The Case of Hak-İş Labour Confederation in Turkey', *Middle Eastern Studies* 41, no. 2 (2005): 237–8.

<sup>34</sup>'1 Mayıs Emek Ve Dayanışma Günü'nde Yaptıkları Konuşma', *TCCB*, 1.5.2019, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/105217/1-mayis-emek-ve-dayanisma-gununde-yaptiklari-konusma>

professional groups.<sup>35</sup> 'In our history', Erdoğan noted, 'there has never been segregation of craftsman and apprentice, worker and employer. They have all, on account of their labour, their contribution and their skills, been members of the same system, enjoying mutual respect and love'.<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, a large section of Islamist movements treat society as a whole of different bodies, without, however, accepting that their relations are antagonistic.<sup>37</sup> In Islamic thought, private property regime have a unique position, allowing for economic diversification and inequality within society to be considered acceptable.<sup>38</sup> According to the same reasoning, social development is only feasible if these different sections of society work together.<sup>39</sup> In this respect, a very large section of the Islamic movement accepts as natural the differences in income and standards of living, the existence of rich and poor, of workers and employers, because they are supposed to secure mobility in society, but also because such differences are 'granted by the Maker himself'.<sup>40</sup> Erdoğan himself explained that 'Whether there is much or little money is a different matter. At this point there is the question of skills, effort and compliance, but the most important of them all is destiny. Therefore, the issue is not to classify life on the basis of money'.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the apprehension expressed does not concern the existence of social inequality, nor is the goal that of eliminating it. What is important is to avoid the politicization of social classes and especially the working class. Besides, it is this dilemma that leads Islamic thought to promote the notion that in an Islamic world order workers and employers are brothers.<sup>42</sup>

In a context of accepting different social statuses, labour is for Islam 'an act of religious worship and duty'. Work is the tool which secures the earthly, but also the after-life.<sup>43</sup> Hard and honest work is considered the exact opposite of idleness, which is condemned as the ugliest waste and killing of time. Work is an activity with existential dimensions since it is believed that 'man exists as long as man works' (*çalıştığı kadar varsin*).<sup>44</sup> Within this ideological context, labour is the most important part of the production process<sup>45</sup> and ethical hierarchy puts forward the need for employers and workers to work hard and in solidarity for the good of the country.<sup>46</sup> Labour is therefore something that concerns the whole of society and in no way signifies social relations and social classes.<sup>47</sup> Ahmet

<sup>35</sup>Şennur Özdemir, 'İslami Sermaye ve Sınıf: Türkiye/Konya MÜSİAD örneği', *Çalışma İlişkileri Dergisi* 1, no. 1 (2010): 38–39; Şennur Özdemir, 'Din-Ekonomi ilişkisi ve güncel arayışlar', *OMÜİFD*, no. 23 (2007): 155–156; Şerif Mardin, 'Tabakalaşmanın Tarihsel Belirleyicileri: Türkiye'de toplumsal sınıf ve sınıf bilinci', in *Şerif Mardin. Türkiye'de Toplum ve Siyaset. Makaleler 1*, eds. Mümtaz'er Türköne and Tuncay Önder (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2012), 79–118.

<sup>36</sup>'HAK-İŞ 5. Uluslararası Kadın Emegi Buluşması'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma', *TCCB*, 7.3.2016, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/40060/hak-is-5-uluslararasi-kadin-emegi-bulusmasinda-yaptiklari-konusma>

<sup>37</sup>Burhanettin Duran and Engin Yıldırım, 'Islamism, Trade Unionism', 236.

<sup>38</sup>Yüksel Işık, *Siyasal İslam ve Sendikalar* (Ankara: Öteki Yayınevi, 1996), 43.

<sup>39</sup>Yüksel Işık, *Siyasal İslam*, 58.

<sup>40</sup>Erdoğan Aydın, *İslamiyet'in ekonomi politikası* (İstanbul: Cumhuriyet Kitapları, 2006), 91–2.

<sup>41</sup>'Çalışma Meclisi'nin 12. Toplantısı'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma', *TCCB*, 23.5.2019, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/105531/calisma-meclisi-nin-12-toplantisi-nda-yaptiklari-konusma>

<sup>42</sup>Mustafa Ammar Kılıç, 'İslamcılığın Emek Söylemi', 653.

<sup>43</sup>Durak Pasmaz, 'Gökten iner mi tembel için arza maide?', *Diyanet Aylık Dergi* no. 257 (2012): 20–1. Ayşe Çavdar, 'As if They Will Never Die: Islamism's Dream of Capital Accumulation', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 118, no. 1 (2019): 28.

<sup>44</sup>Sacit Ekerim, 'Çalıştığı kadar varsin', *Diyanet Aylık Dergi* no. 257 (2012): 33.

<sup>45</sup>Yüksel Işık, *Siyasal İslam*, 46–7.

<sup>46</sup>Meryem Koray, 'AKP dönemi: Neo-liberalizm, Neo-muhafazakarlık, Neo-popülizm beşiğinde sallanan sosyal devlet ve sosyal politika' in *Himmet, Fitrat, Piyasa. AKP döneminde sosyal politika*, eds. Meryem Koray and Aziz Çelik (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2015), 33.

<sup>47</sup>Yıldırım Koç, 'Şeriatçılar', 52.

Tabakoğlu stresses that the identification of this concept with that of the worker should not be accepted because labour is not something that exclusively belongs to a specific social class or stratum.<sup>48</sup> Following the same logic, all those who work and toil, all those who produce value through their professional activity, can be called labourers.<sup>49</sup> According to Erdoğan, the ideal prospect would be if all labourers accept that there are no substantial differentiations and gather in 'one organisation in their capacity as "labourers"'.<sup>50</sup>

The common capacity of professions as parts of the production process is at the same time the basis of their solidarity,<sup>51</sup> the basis for the extinction of class antagonism and the prevalence of consensus and cooperation.<sup>52</sup> Even if a difference in social status between worker and employer really exists,<sup>53</sup> capital and labour 'are two inseparable friends and the destruction of this friendship will clear the way for the destruction of social peace'.<sup>54</sup> What is sought to be excluded is awareness of class inequality and antagonism, because the maturing of the position that workers and employers constitute different sides is considered as a situation that does not benefit the nation's development.<sup>55</sup> The identification of workers and employers in a single, classless value system has been described by Erdoğan as follows: 'Approaches that do not take into account the inextricable link between labour, employer and worker have no good result. We do not distinguish production from toil, capital from labour, profit from justice'.<sup>56</sup> In this sense, the sanctification of labour and its legitimization through religious references is more a 'token of appreciation and gratitude'<sup>57</sup> and not encouragement to claim a dividend from the profits of production.

At a more practical level, the effort to eliminate class cleavages takes the form of an ongoing consultation between workers and employers, based on mutual respect and trust.<sup>58</sup> Thus, for a large section of Islamism, resolution of issues of inequality and social injustice is placed in an environment of informal labour relations.<sup>59</sup> For example, the employer is called upon to pay adequate wages 'so as to have a clear conscience before God'.<sup>60</sup> Fair salary is neither a legal obligation nor the outcome of trade union claims. It is the result of the prevalence of Islamic morality, honesty and charity.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>48</sup>Mutlu Doğan, 'Prof. Dr. Ahmet Tabakoğlu ile "emeğin değeri" üzerine söyleşi', *Diyanet Aylık Dergi* no. 257 (2012): 49.  
<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 49–50.

<sup>50</sup>Çalışma ve Sosyal Güvenlik Bakanlığı, 10. Çalışma Meclisi, 26–27 Eylül 2013 (Ankara: Miki Matbaacılık, 2013), 18.

<sup>51</sup>Adem Esen, 'Emeğin Değeri', *Diyanet Aylık Dergi* no. 257 (2012): 7–8.

<sup>52</sup>Muhlis Akar, 'Çalışma hayatında görev ve sorumluluklarımız', *Diyanet Aylık Dergisi* no. 257 (2012): 11–12. Aziz Çelik, 'AKP döneminde sendikalar hakları: sendikasızsız-grevsiz kaynaşmış bir kitleyiz', in *Himmat, Fitrat, Piyasa. AKP döneminde sosyal politika*, eds. Meryem Koray and Aziz Çelik (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2015), 163; Osman Kürşat Acar and Büşra Soydemir, 'Dini perspektifte emek ve emek sömürüsü: İşçi-İşveren üzerinden bir değerlendirme', *PESA International Journal of Social Studies* 3, no. 4 (2017): 59–73.

<sup>53</sup>Mehmet Görmez, 'Emek: Alın terinin değeri', *Diyanet Aylık Dergi* no. 257 (2012): 1.

<sup>54</sup>Yıldırım Koç, 'Şeriatçılar', 52. Yüksel Işık, *Siyasal İslam*, 57.

<sup>55</sup>Çalışma ve Sosyal Güvenlik Bakanlığı, 10. Çalışma Meclisi, 26–27 Eylül 2013 (Ankara: Miki Matbaacılık, 2013), 18.

<sup>56</sup>'1 Mayıs Emek Ve Dayanışma Günü'nde Yaptıkları Konuşma', TCCB, May 1, 2019, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/105217/1-mayis-emek-ve-dayanisma-gununde-yaptiklari-konusma>

<sup>57</sup>Yıldırım Koç, 'Şeriatçılar', 53.

<sup>58</sup>Burhanettin Duran and Engin Yıldırım, 'Islamism, Trade Unionism', 236; Yunus Furkan Arıcan, 'Sınıf, Siyaset ve Kimlik Arasında: Hak-İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu', in *Türkiye'nin Büyük Dönüşümü. Ayşe Buğra'ya Armağan*, eds. Osman Savaşkan and Mehmet Ertan (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2018), 559.

<sup>59</sup>Ayşe Buğra, 'Labour, Capital and Religion: Harmony and Conflict among the Constituency of Political Islam in Turkey', *Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 2 (2002): 195.

<sup>60</sup>Mustafa Ammar Kılıç, 'İslamcılığın Emek Söylemi', 635.

<sup>61</sup>Adem Esen, 'Emeğin Değeri', 5.



The aversion to class antagonism was expressed, among other ways, through two specific ideological and political aspects of the AKP government. The first was the attempt to impose the identity of the desired worker who will adapt to the framework of values of the nation and New Turkey. The second was the attempt to boost desired trade unionism, which will precisely represent the tendency of aversion to class antagonism and promote conservative social peace.

The desired worker, the ultimate symbol of the 'amenable labour force',<sup>62</sup> is the one who places themselves unconditionally in the service of the state and the nation.<sup>63</sup> Erdoğan described Turkey's desired worker as follows: 'Our workers are people who respect their nation and values and would not hesitate to sacrifice their lives for them, as they did on the night of 15 July. On the contrary, those who took advantage of the concept of the worker to launch an ideological war against our nation have nothing to do either with the defending sweat and toil, or with the defence of law and justice'.<sup>64</sup>

Thus, in sharp contrast to a working class 'open to ideological influences'<sup>65</sup> as a product of western society, Erdoğan projects the desired worker as representative of conservative ethics, defender of state authority and obedient to the leader's decisions. This type of worker correctly assesses social priorities and accepts as his main duty 'the upholding of one nation, one flag, one homeland and one state',<sup>66</sup> that is, obeying the national values imposed by the government and its political programme.

AKP's principal ideological orientation regarding the organized labour was not the complete abolition of trade unions but their transformation to a structure that would reproduce and disperse its political programme to the masses of labourers. As Bilge Yabancı underlines in her own research, AKP sought to control workers' claims and to discipline their political participation and grassroots organizations.<sup>67</sup> In this way it sought to, on the one hand, contain possible political upheavals from class and trade union activity and, on the other hand, appropriate<sup>68</sup> labour claims and demands through absorption. Instead of proceeding with the total marginalization of trade unionism, the AKP government sought to control working class dynamics and erode their class orientations through the strengthening of 'paternalistic and symbiotic unionism'.<sup>69</sup>

At this point, the unfolding of desired (*makbul*) trade unionism is recorded—trade unionism, that is, adapted to the authentic ethno-religious values of the nation. Desired trade unionism is a form that adopts the basic ideological references of the Turkish state. It does not possess class characteristics in its aims and contains its activities within the strict framework of promoting solutions to some of the problems faced by members of a trade union. Acceptable trade unionism is alienated from the politicization of the concept

<sup>62</sup>Didem Özkiziltan, 'Authoritarian Neoliberalism in AKP's Turkey', 230.

<sup>63</sup>*Hak-İş Dergisi* no. 20 (2019): 74.

<sup>64</sup>'1 Mayıs Emek Ve Dayanışma Günü'nde Yaptıkları Konuşma', *TCCB*, 1.5.2019, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/105217/1-mayis-emek-ve-dayanisma-gununde-yaptiklari-konusma>

<sup>65</sup>Mustafa Ammar Kılıç, 'İslamcılığın Emek Söylemi', 636.

<sup>66</sup>'1 Mayıs Emek Ve Dayanışma Günü'nde Yaptıkları Konuşma', *TCCB*, 1.5.2019, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/105217/1-mayis-emek-ve-dayanisma-gununde-yaptiklari-konusma>

<sup>67</sup>Bilge Yabancı, 'Populism as the Problem Child of Democracy: The AKP's Enduring Appeal and the Use of Meso-Level Actors', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016), 598.

<sup>68</sup>For the dual function of containment and appropriation of organizations and civil society, see Bilge Yabancı, 'Turkey's Tamed Civil Society: Containment and Appropriation Under a Competitive Authoritarian Regime', *Journal of Civil Society* 15, no. 4 (2019): 285–306.

<sup>69</sup>Aziz Çelik, 'Turkey's New Labour Regime Under the Justice and Development Party in the First Decade of the Twenty-First Century: Authoritarian Flexibilization', *Middle Eastern Studies* 51, no. 4 (2015): 632.

of social class; it does not threaten but supports 'national unity' and does not cause shifts in economic balance.<sup>70</sup> This framework leads to the pursuit of a 'non-confrontational' trade unionism that is almost entirely adapted to the values of social cohesion and harmony the power bloc wishes to impose as characteristics of the 'imaginary society–nation' it strives to construct.<sup>71</sup> It is no coincidence that Erdoğan referred to the existence of this political vacuum, stressing that 'in our country the model of organisation is based on the West and for this reason we are in need of a trade unionism that will be based on our own history and culture'.<sup>72</sup>

In this respect, trade unions should, according to Turkish Islamism, have a mediating and consulting role, keep away from the political process and assist the state in the administration of justice.<sup>73</sup> In 2019, the then Labour Minister, Süleyman Soylu, stressed that the role of trade unions is to 'reduce the gap between state and citizens'.<sup>74</sup> In this context, the trade unions should focus on consultation and exclusion of class conflict dynamics. AKP claims that its own model of trade unionism is in stark contrast to the one that has prevailed in the West, because it precisely promotes the idea that workers and employers 'walk along the same path'.<sup>75</sup> The wider objective is the encouragement of trade union activity that stays afar from 'ideologies that serve chaos',<sup>76</sup> to refer more to forms of economic solidarity and cooperation<sup>77</sup> and to therefore secure the fundamental principle of fraternity between employers and workers.<sup>78</sup> However, as the analysis in the next part of the article shows, the key task of marginalizing class-oriented trade unionism is not peculiar to Turkey. On the contrary, it is linked to basic notions of neo-liberal intellectuals who, many decades earlier, had argued that what was important was not the abolition of trade unions per se, but the enfeeblement of their class orientation.<sup>79</sup>

### **Hak-İş: the ultimate expression of desired trade unionism and a state apparatus for control**

'The Turkish worker adheres to moral values and is devoted to national values, as well as to historical tradition, our customs and practices'.<sup>80</sup> This is how Hak-İş (The Confederation of Righteous Trade Unions) described Turkey's desired worker in the mid-1980s. This was the all-round image of the God-fearing citizen 'who works with religious passion'.<sup>81</sup> The description of the confederation's specific goal is of particular importance in the context of its relation to the effort to marginalize class society.

<sup>70</sup>Fuat Man, 'Türkiye'de devlet, ideoloji ve sendika: 1980 öncesi DISK örneği' (PhD Thesis, Sakarya Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Sakarya, 2009), 185.

<sup>71</sup>Aykut Öztürk, 'Islamists Against the Class Cleavage: Identity Formation and Interest Representation in the Case of Hak-İş in Turkey', *Middle Eastern Studies* 54, no. 3 (2018): 463.

<sup>72</sup>'HAK-İŞ 5. Uluslararası Kadın Emegi Buluşması'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma', *TCCB*, 7.3.2016, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/40060/hak-is-5-uluslararasi-kadin-emegi-bulusmasinda-yaptiklari-konusma>

<sup>73</sup>Adem Esen, *Sosyal siyaset açısından İslam'da ücret* (Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 1993), 56.

<sup>74</sup>*Hak-İş Dergisi* no. 20 (2019): 198.

<sup>75</sup>Çalışma ve Sosyal Güvenlik Bakanlığı, 10. Çalışma Meclisi, 26–27 Eylül 2013 (Ankara: Miki Matbaacılık, 2013), 18.

<sup>76</sup>Aziz Çelik, 'AKP döneminde sendikal haklar', 163.

<sup>77</sup>Yüksel Işık, *Siyasal İslam ve Sendikalar* (Ankara: Öteki Yayınevi, 1996), 65.

<sup>78</sup>Şennur Özdemir, 'İslami Sermaye ve Sınıf', 42.

<sup>79</sup>Ben Jackson, 'Neoliberalism, Labour and Trade Unionism', in *The Routledge Handbook of Neoliberalism*, eds. Simon Springer, Kean Birch & Julie MacLeavy (New York & London: Routledge, 2016) 260.

<sup>80</sup>Yıldırım Koç, 'Şeriatçılar', 60.

<sup>81</sup>Yüksel Işık, *Siyasal İslam*, 80.

From the very beginning of its founding, Hak-İş claimed to be established as the 'only option for the creation of a working class with national, spiritual and historical values, adapted to conditions in the country'.<sup>82</sup> The importance of the confederation lies, among other things, in its strategic position in relation to the goal of constructing an imaginary community of social cohesion and harmony, but to a greater extent in relation to the goal of delegitimisation of class-oriented trade union activities.<sup>83</sup> The current president of Hak-İş, Mahmut Arslan, described the confederation's historic mission as meeting the 'need for a new opening' that would express opposition to class conflict and pose an obstacle to the attempt at 'defeat and surrender of the employers'.<sup>84</sup>

The very establishment of the Confederation was therefore the result of a conscious effort to contain class-oriented trade unionism, which had been particularly strengthened since the mid-1960s with the emergence of left-wing DİSK (Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions). The country's Islamist movement established Hak-İş in 1976, as the organization that would undertake the spreading of the National Salvation Party (MSP) ideology to the working class at a time when the party participated in the coalition governments.<sup>85</sup>

Hak-İş's declared goal was to instil religious and conservative moral values to the country's workers. These values were fundamental in achieving the goal of fraternization of capital and labour.<sup>86</sup> According to the confederation, the central goal should have been the deterrence of class conflict, since its existence hindered the recreation of a great Turkey.<sup>87</sup> In this ideological context, class struggle was a side effect of Turkey's authoritarian westernization and a phenomenon that threatened the society's traditional moral values.<sup>88</sup> In this way the confederation reproduced the nostalgia of an imperial past, where there were no social classes and antagonisms as in the capitalist context; a nostalgia which supposedly lacked the modern phenomena of injustice, greed and exploitation.<sup>89</sup>

Just like political Islam parties, Hak-İş considered capitalism and communism as 'tyrannical systems with alien roots', incompatible with the real values of a Muslim nation. Entirely at odds with 'foreign ideologies', the confederation promoted its own model as a 'genuine movement' of workers and as the only one able to sever the country's workers from the influence of Zionist forces.<sup>90</sup> This distinct and peculiar identity of Hak-İş went hand-in-hand with the promotion of the concept of a 'new trade union model, under the wider umbrella of the Islamic faith and way of life'.<sup>91</sup>

The intensity with which the confederation defends the position that it represents the only trade union model based on the 'local and national' (*yerli ve milli*) values of Turkey continues to this day. This model of trade unionism is considered as the only democratic one, since contrary to the elitism of other trade union organizations, Hak-İş has not been

<sup>82</sup> Mustafa Ammar Kılıç, 'İslamcılığın Emek Söylemi', 636–7.

<sup>83</sup> Aykut Öztürk, 'Islamists Against the Class Cleavage', 460–1.

<sup>84</sup> *Hak-İş Dergisi* no. 21 (2019): 198.

<sup>85</sup> Burhanettin Duran and Engin Yıldırım, 'Islamism, Trade Unionism', 231; Ayşe Buğra, 'Labour, Capital and Religion', 196.

<sup>86</sup> Aykut Öztürk, 'Islamists Against the Class Cleavage', 463; Zeynep Alemdar, 'Turkish Trade Unions and the European Boomerang', *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 9 (2009): <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejts.3774> online publication.

<sup>87</sup> Burhanettin Duran and Engin Yıldırım, 'Islamism, Trade Unionism', 231.

<sup>88</sup> Bilge Yabancı, 'Populism as the problem child', 602.

<sup>89</sup> Aykut Öztürk, 'Islamists Against the Class Cleavage', 464.

<sup>90</sup> Burhanettin Duran and Engin Yıldırım, 'Islamism, Trade Unionism', 232.

<sup>91</sup> Yıldırım Koç, 'Şeriatçılar', 59.

alienated from the local religious and moral national values.<sup>92</sup> As a matter of fact, the status of the confederation as the only 'local and national' workers' organization,<sup>93</sup> is further encapsulated in the conviction that it monopolistically embodies the entire historical acquis of Anatolian territory, as it emerged in the last one thousand years.<sup>94</sup> The specific organic relation between Hak-İş and the labour strata in the country was described by its president, Mahmut Arslan, as follows: 'We are Turkey itself. We carry on our shoulders the historical acquis, we are part of our civilisation and culture and this is why we safeguard the unity of our country'.<sup>95</sup>

Even though Hak-İş was initially opposed to the prospect of Turkey's accession to the EU,<sup>96</sup> it nonetheless later on proceeded to review its position and intensify its effort for legitimization within the European framework. A characteristic feature was the perception that the model of trade unionism that focused on the rejection of politicization of social classes was now dominant in the West as well.<sup>97</sup> Particularly from the mid-1990s onwards, the confederation adopted the idea of 'social partners', thus creating a wider environment of European legitimization of the concept of harmony between employer and worker.<sup>98</sup> It is on this particular point that the fundamental contradiction of Hak-İş lies, as it claims to represent a unique 'local and national' model of trade unionism. The adoption of the concept of 'social partnership', which has its roots in the creation of the Catholic 'Christian trade unions', connects the example of Hak-İş to other Western cases. An important common denominator between the Turkish case and the western countries was that the activation of the 'social partnership' focused precisely on the idea of harmony between capital and labour and therefore on the need for cooperation and not class confrontation.<sup>99</sup> From a certain point onwards, the leadership of the confederation emphasized the vindication of its position through the conviction that globalization marked the end of ideologies and the beginning of the shift of labour movements towards the safeguarding of their grassroots cultural identities and not their class interests. The 21st century was for Hak-İş the time of the final defeat of social classes and their antagonisms and thus the vindication of a 'civil society trade unionism'<sup>100</sup> better adapted to the moral values of the Turkish nation.

At the same time, the desired model of trade unionism promoted by Hak-İş is adapted, to a great degree, to the basic perception of Islamism that civil society organizations, like labour organizations, should, once they reject their class dimension, function as state apparatuses and contribute to the duty of the state to administer justice.<sup>101</sup>

The activities of Hak-İş have a multidimensional role in the aforementioned framework. The attempt to assimilate worker demands and marginalize their class orientations cannot be achieved solely through the ideological construction of a cultural identity of labourers.

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<sup>92</sup>Hak-İş Dergisi no. 11 (2016): 84.

<sup>93</sup>Hak-İş Dergisi no. 20 (2019): 52.

<sup>94</sup>Hak-İş Dergisi no. 25 (2020): 147.

<sup>95</sup>Hak-İş Dergisi no. 16 (2018): 178.

<sup>96</sup>Zeynep Alemdar, 'Turkish Trade Unions', online publication.

<sup>97</sup>Şennur Özdemir, 'Türkiye'nin özgün sınıflaşması: MÜSİAD ve Hak-İş', *Sivil Toplum Dergisi* 5, no. 19 (2007): 71.

<sup>98</sup>Aykut Öztürk, 'Islamists Against the Class Cleavage', 468–9.

<sup>99</sup>Richard Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism. Between market, class and society* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001) 48–9.

<sup>100</sup>İşıl Erdiç, 'AKP döneminde sendikal alanın yeniden yapılanması ve kutuplaşma: Hak-İş ve Ötekiler', *Çalışma ve Toplum* 2 (2014): 165.

<sup>101</sup>Yıldırım Koç, 'Şeriatçılar', 54; Yüksel Işık, *Siyasal İslam ve Sendikalar*, 83.

This process should be accompanied by the transformation of everyday social and economic practices.<sup>102</sup> It is exactly for this reason that the confederation considers good, almost instrumental, relations with the Erdoğan government as an advantage and projects them as the guarantee of its effectiveness in promoting labour demands.<sup>103</sup> One of the characteristic examples was the effort to monopolize the resolution of problems related to labourers in the public subcontracting sector. The decision to grant a more permanent employment status to workers in the public subcontracting sector was presented by the leadership of the organization along two axes: on the one hand, as an outcome of Hak-İş and government cooperation, despite the deliberate absence of the other trade union organizations,<sup>104</sup> and on the other hand, as propagating the support of workers to the government. The president of the confederation pledged, before crowds cheering Erdoğan on the particular decision, to ‘support our President and to walk along the same path as him for development, the future and peace, so as to make Turkey a strong state’.<sup>105</sup>

Thus, on the one hand Hak-İş is turned into the basic partner in the process of enforcing the new national identity and the values of the ‘desired worker’, while on the other hand it has a catalytic role in the practical realization and proliferation of power strategies in different areas of political life—just like Erdoğan himself stated in the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Confederation: ‘Since its establishment, Hak-İş has not confined itself to the pursuit of workers’ rights but has also shown an interest in all social issues. Contrary to some structures that operate in the same field and remain unsensitized to the genuine values and interests of the nation, Hak-İş has worked with a local and national perception’.<sup>106</sup>

Hak-İş activates its Islamic background and secures its position as a structural part of the AKP rule, within which of course it co-exists with other organizations, including those of the Islamic business elite.<sup>107</sup> In this sense, religion is a kind of relational capital which contributes both to the relation of the confederation with sections of labourers, as well as to communication channels with the government.<sup>108</sup> By promoting the particular model of trade unionism as modern, but at the same time as ‘local and national’, Hak-İş does not only aim for its establishment in the workplace with a consensus of employers and workers. On the contrary, it claims to be the disseminator of that particular perception in the whole spectrum of social activity.<sup>109</sup> In this way, the so-called ‘local and national’ trade unionism is promoted as a platform for the development of social relations.<sup>110</sup> The aforementioned point is in fact a dynamic that differentiates AKP from previous governments in the country, since it seems to have managed to create not only a kind of trade unionism generally compatible with the policies of the state and the business elite, but

<sup>102</sup> Aykut Öztürk, ‘Islamists Against the Class Cleavage’, 465–6.

<sup>103</sup> Şil Erdiç, ‘AKP döneminde sendikal alanın’, 166.

<sup>104</sup> *Hak-İş Dergisi* no. 16 (2018): 38.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>106</sup> Hak-İş 14. Olağan Genel Kurulu’nda Yaptıkları Konuşma’, *TCCB*, 10.7.2019, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/107032/hak-is-14-olagan-genel-kurulu-nda-yaptiklari-konusma>

<sup>107</sup> Yunus Furkan Arıcan, ‘Sınıf, Siyaset ve Kimlik’, 571.

<sup>108</sup> Ayşe Buğra, ‘Labour, Capital and Religion’, 200.

<sup>109</sup> *Hak-İş Dergisi* no. 20 (2019): 80.

<sup>110</sup> *Hak-İş Dergisi* no. 16 (2018): 49.

furthermore<sup>111</sup> an AKP-led trade unionism that functions as a direct extension of the party in power.<sup>112</sup> The complete subordination of Hak-İş to AKP's party politics might be seen as a feature of fascist regimes rather than simply authoritarian ones.<sup>113</sup>

Hak-İş has actively participated in all of AKP's political campaigns. It fully supported the government in December 2013 following the revelation of a wide-ranging scandal involving high-ranking government officials and embraced the view that these revelations constituted an 'international plot seeking to create a weak Turkey and destroy its stability'.<sup>114</sup> It was an active member of the platform of 16 organizations, including business associations, for the promotion of the presidential system.<sup>115</sup> It organized mass rallies in support of 'Yes' in over 40 provinces in the April 2017 referendum, promoting the necessity of adopting the presidential system as a form of state consolidation.<sup>116</sup> It mobilized outside the courtrooms after the coup attempt, demanding the perpetrators be made an example of and punished. In many of these mobilizations, emphasis was put on the need to reinstate the death penalty.<sup>117</sup> It has fervently supported since 2015 the state decision to resort to military action as the way to resolve the Kurdish problem.<sup>118</sup> At the same time, it worked for the promotion of AKP candidates in the 2019 municipal elections, fully endorsing the government framework which transformed that particular election contest into a stark choice of 'survival of the state'<sup>119</sup> versus the attacks by internal and external enemies.

One of the most important functions of Hak-İş as an AKP apparatus for the reproduction of the ideological vision of Erdoğan is the 'nationalisation' process of May Day. The process of 'nationalisation' of this particular anniversary essentially aims at the marginalization of its class content. As Erdoğan himself stressed, the introduction of 1 May as a public holiday was an action in order to grant the day its 'real meaning' and to prevent 'marginal organisations' from exploiting it to undermine social peace.<sup>120</sup> According to the confederation's leadership, the 'old' May Day mobilizations at Taksim square in Istanbul were 'distorted initiatives' and imposed on the nation, since their only goal was to cause tension and chaos in society.<sup>121</sup> However, the holding of separate May Day events by Hak-İş in Anatolian cities constitutes an 'act of resistance' against the authoritarian elitism of 'well-known organisations'.<sup>122</sup> The enhancement of such events with the recitation of the Koran and marches performed by Ottoman military bands symbolizes the 'normalisation'

<sup>111</sup>For further analysis regarding Türk-İş and its role as a trade union compatible with the policies of the state and the business elite in: Fatih Yaşlı, *Antikomünizm, Ülkücü Hareket, Türkiye. Türkiye ve Soğuk Savaş* (İstanbul: Yordam Kitap, 2019) 37–41.

<sup>112</sup>Mustafa Kemal Coşkun, 'AKP'den işçi sınıfına: "Kusura bakma arkadaş ..."', *Devrimci Marksizm*, no. 39–40 (2019): 67.

<sup>113</sup>I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for this important comment.

<sup>114</sup>Hak-İş: Uluslararası operasyona karşı toplumu uyanık ve sağlıklı olmaya çağırıyoruz', *Hak-İş*, 23.12.2013, [https://www.hakis.org.tr/haberler.php?action=haber\\_detay&id=639](https://www.hakis.org.tr/haberler.php?action=haber_detay&id=639)

<sup>115</sup>*Hak-İş Dergisi* no. 11 (2016): 63.

<sup>116</sup>*Hak-İş Dergisi* no. 14 (2017): 46–64.

<sup>117</sup>*Hak-İş Dergisi* no. 15 (2017): 22.

<sup>118</sup>*Hak-İş Dergisi* no. 11 (2016): 94.

<sup>119</sup>*Hak-İş Dergisi* no. 20 (2019): 76–7, 136.

<sup>120</sup>1 Mayıs Emek Ve Dayanışma Günü'nde Yaptıkları Konuşma', *TCCB*, 1.5.2019, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/105217/1-mayis-emek-ve-dayanisma-gununde-yaptiklari-konusma>

<sup>121</sup>*Hak-İş Dergisi* no. 14 (2017): 3.

<sup>122</sup>*ibid.*, 12.

of May Day.<sup>123</sup> The leadership of the confederation chooses in this way to emphasize that the expression of the 'national will of Anatolia'<sup>124</sup> in the May Day events is precisely what can strip the day of any class orientation and 'settling of scores' characteristics.<sup>125</sup>

The aversion of Hak-İş to class trade unionism and its operation as an apparatus of Erdoğan's government is clearly recorded also in the field of workers' mobilizations. In contrast to its intense activity in reproducing the key positions in the government's political programme, the confederation abstains from labour issues. For example, out of the 545 labour mobilizations recorded in 2013, Hak-İş participation was confined to only 7%,<sup>126</sup> and in 2014, out of a total 1001 labour protests, it participated in a meagre 4%.<sup>127</sup> The same and even lower rates of participation were recorded in the years that followed—2015<sup>128</sup> to 2019<sup>129</sup>—a period which witnessed a massive boost in the percentages of workers it represented.

### Dimensions of the policy against the 'non-acceptable working class'

The process of the ideological and political construction of an acceptable—conservative—trade unionism combines with the parallel construction of the exact opposite—a collective class identity and activity of workers who do not conform to the dominant ideology and its values. This is 'non-acceptable' trade union activity, a kind of 'hostile other' among the working masses, which should be marginalized and suppressed.<sup>130</sup> In this respect, the goal of enfeebling class trade unionism cannot be achieved by the ideological and political encouragement of conservative trade unionism alone. As the AKP case shows, practical measures at organizational and ideological level are required, which would on the one hand create obstacles against class trade unions, but at the same time organizationally reinforce the operation of structures such as Hak-İş.

On the one hand, AKP sought to decrease trade union density, wear down the effectiveness of workers' organizations and suppress collective action. It proceeded to specific policies encouraging labour market flexibility, containment of collective bargaining influence and reinforcement of atomization of legislation on labour related issues. At the same time, it changed the Trade Union and Collective Bargaining Law in 2012, imposing new restrictions on the ability of trade unions to influence collective bargaining and extending bans on strikes.<sup>131</sup> Characteristically, after the 2016 military coup attempt, the government proceeded to further reinforce the Council of State Supervision (Devlet Denetleme Kurulu), delegating it the power to monitor all trade and professional unions, including the right to oust elected leaders of these organized groups. According to Aziz

<sup>123</sup>Hak-İş Dergisi no. 20, (2019): 45.

<sup>124</sup>Hak-İş Dergisi no. 11 (2016): 15.

<sup>125</sup>Hak-İş Dergisi no. 14 (2017): 14.

<sup>126</sup>İrfan Kaygısız, '2013 yılı işçi sınıfı eylemleri üzerine değerlendirme', *DİSK AR Bülteni* no. 2 (2014): 117.

<sup>127</sup>İrfan Kaygısız, '2014 yılı işçi sınıfı eylemleri üzerine değerlendirme', *DİSK AR Bülteni* no. 4 (2015): 148–9.

<sup>128</sup>İrfan Kaygısız, '2013–2015 yılı işçi sınıfı eylemleri üzerine değerlendirme', *DİSK AR Bülteni* no. 5 (2016): 168.

<sup>129</sup>Ayşe Alınçık, Alpkın Birelma, Ebru Işıklı, and Deniz Sert, eds., *2016 işçi sınıfı eylemleri raporu* (İstanbul: Emek Çalışmaları Topluluğu, 2017), 27; Ayşe Alınçık, Deniz Beyazbulut, Alpkın Birelma, B. Elvan Erginli, Çağrı Gökçek, Ebru Işıklı, Özlem İlyas, Akın Sefer, H. Deniz Sert, and Zeynep Turan eds., *2017 işçi sınıfı eylemleri raporu* (İstanbul: Emek Çalışmaları Topluluğu, 2018), 36; Alpkın Birelma, Bürge Elvan Erginli, Ebru Işıklı, Akın Sefer, and H. Deniz Sert, eds., *2018 işçi sınıfı eylemleri raporu* (İstanbul: Emek Çalışmaları Topluluğu, 2019) 36; Alpkın Birelma, Ebru Işıklı, and H. Deniz Sert, eds., *2019 işçi sınıfı eylemleri raporu* (İstanbul: Emek Çalışmaları Topluluğu, 2021), 38.

<sup>130</sup>Fuat Man, 'Türkiye'de devlet, ideoloji ve sendika', 185–6.

<sup>131</sup>Mehmet Erman Erol, 'State and Labour', 663–77.

Çelik, the early<sup>132</sup> years of AKP government in particular were a period of ‘forced peace’ (*zoraki barış*)<sup>133</sup> as a result of a dramatic reduction in strikes and the deactivation of the labour movement. The coerced social peace was the result of the bans imposed by the AKP government, which eventually proved to be a key tool for the marginalization of non-acceptable trade unionism. From 2003 to 2019, AKP banned strikes, affecting some 193 thousand workers.<sup>134</sup>

At the same time, during the period 2002–2011, Turkey recorded the largest decrease in trade union density, by 38%, among all OECD member states.<sup>135</sup> According to Aziz Çelik, this is also the period with the lowest trade union density in Turkey in the past 50 years.<sup>136</sup> Exactly the same trend was recorded in the percentages of workers covered by collective agreements. In 1987 this percentage was 28.6%, in 1999 it decreased to 13.3%, while in 2012 it further decreased to 5.4%.<sup>137</sup> In 2016 the percentage of workers covered by collective agreements rose to 7% and in 2017 to 7.6%.<sup>138</sup> Even though during the period 2013–2019 the percentages of trade union density showed a relative increase, Turkey’s figure remained rather low among the OECD member states with around 90% of workers being unorganized.<sup>139</sup> At the end of this particular period, the workers who were members of trade unions rose to 1,859,000, recording an increase of some 860 thousand new members.<sup>140</sup>

On the other hand, however, the AKP government encouraged mass organizations dedicated to its own political programme.<sup>141</sup> As in other similar cases of authoritarian governments, AKP faced the following dilemma: on the one hand it sought the full control and manipulation of society, but on the other hand it needed social legitimacy and popular mobilization to support its rule. It needed organized groups acting as disciplinary guarantors of the new subjects.<sup>142</sup> Through this policy, Hak-İş eventually emerged as structure of strategic importance for the reproduction of AKP rule among the masses of labourers.<sup>143</sup> It is not coincidental that a basic aspect of the recent increase in trade union density percentages is in parallel with Hak-İş massification<sup>144</sup> and the asymmetry recorded in the increase of trade union density among the Confederations.<sup>145</sup>

<sup>132</sup>Fatih Polat, ‘Tam bir hegemonya için zorun hukukunun inşası süreci’, *Evrensel*, 18.7.2018, <https://www.evrensel.net/yazi/81897/tam-bir-hegemonya-icin-zorun-hukukunun-insasi-sureci>

<sup>133</sup>Aziz Çelik, ‘Türkiye’de 2000 li yıllarda grevler ve grev dışı eylemler’, *Sosyal Haklar Ulusal Sempozyumu IV Bildiriler* (İstanbul: Petrol-İş Yayını, 2012), 107–129.

<sup>134</sup>Mustafa Kemal Coşkun, ‘AKP’den işçi sınıfına’, 68–9.

<sup>135</sup>Aziz Çelik, ‘Trade Unions and Deunionization during Ten Years of AKP Rule’, *Perspectives Heinrich Böll Stiftung* 3 (2013): 45.

<sup>136</sup>Aziz Çelik, ‘AKP döneminde sendikal haklar’, 157.

<sup>137</sup>Ahmet Bekmen, Ferit Serkan Öngel, and Vedi R. Hadiz, ‘Contesting Working-Class Politics in Turkey: Social Transformations, Islam, and the Left’, *Critical Sociology* 46, no. 7–8 (2020): 1031.

<sup>138</sup>Alpkan Birelma, ‘Trade Unions in Turkey 2018’, *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung* (2018): 4–5; DİSK AR, Sendikalaşma Araştırması: Türkiye’de sendikalaşma, toplu iş sözleşmesi kapsamı ve grevler (2013–2019), *DİSK* 2019, 6.

<sup>139</sup>DİSK AR, Sendikalaşma Araştırması: Türkiye’de sendikalaşma, toplu iş sözleşmesi kapsamı ve grevler (2013–2019), *DİSK* 2019, 12.

<sup>140</sup>Mustafa Kemal Coşkun and Ali Rıza Güngen, ‘Türkiye’de Çalışma Yaşamında Hak Mücadelesi Önündeki Engeller’, *Hala Gazeteciyyiz Hak İhlali Raporları-1*, Kasım-2019, <https://halagazeteciyyiz.net/2020/01/28/hala-gazeteciyyiz-hak-ihlali-raporlari-1-kasim-2019-turkiyede-calisma-yasaminda-hak-mucadelesi-onundeki-engeller/>

<sup>141</sup>İşil Erdinç, ‘AKP döneminde sendikal alanın’, 160.

<sup>142</sup>Bilge Yabancı, ‘Turkey’s Tamed Civil Society’, 286.

<sup>143</sup>Yunus Furkan Arıcan, ‘Sınıf, Siyaset ve Kimlik’, 565.

<sup>144</sup>Mustafa Kemal Coşkun, ‘AKP’den işçi sınıfına’, 67.

<sup>145</sup>Aziz Çelik, ‘Sembiyotik ilişkiler ve otoriter korporatizm kıskacında 2010 lu yıllarda Türkiye’de sendikalaşma, toplu pazarlık ve grev eğilimleri’, *Uluslararası Yönetim İktisat ve İşletme Dergisi*, (2018): 51–2.



Characteristically, Hak-İş had six trade unions in 2003, and managed to reach 22 by 2018.<sup>146</sup> In 2013 Hak-İş had 166,553 members and was the second largest in Turkey (Türk-İş 709,162 and DİSK 100,202). In 2019, in a period of just six years, Hak-İş increased its membership by 517,000, reaching 684,144. This 311% increase was larger than the total membership increase achieved by the two remaining confederations together. At this particular period, Türk-İş and DİSK increased their members by 337,000.<sup>147</sup> In terms of percentages, Türk-İş recorded a 38% increase and DİSK a 71% increase.<sup>148</sup>

This specific period is indicative of the strengthening of 'desired trade unionism', since the 2014 legislation that allowed the trade union organization to operate in the public subcontracting sector<sup>149</sup> seems to have mostly benefited Hak-İş. In particular, Hizmet-İş (a trade union of Hak-İş), operating in the municipalities, became one of the strongest trade unions of the confederation, organizing some 220,000 workers out of the 489,000 Hak-İş members in 2016.<sup>150</sup> Hizmet-İş continued its massification until 2021, reaching 238,666 members.<sup>151</sup> The dramatic increase in membership of Öz Sağlık-İş, operating in the health sector, was also significant. This particular Hak-İş trade union, with 42,097 members at the beginning of 2020, managed to organize 185,370 workers by January 2021.<sup>152</sup>

The trend of strengthened Hak-İş support compared to the two other main confederations was also confirmed by 2016–2021 data. During this period Hak-İş increased its membership by 274,753, Türk-İş by 254,162 and DİSK by 49,575.<sup>153</sup> In January 2021, Hak-İş had 711,295 members, retaining its position as the second largest trade union confederation in Turkey.<sup>154</sup> It is also indicative that among the five largest trade union organizations in the country, two belong to Hak-İş. The largest is Hizmet-İş with 238,660 members in January 2021, while the third largest is Öz Sağlık-İş with 185,370 members in January 2021.<sup>155</sup>

As far as the level of ideological demonization is concerned, multi-level tactics have also been recorded. Class-oriented collective action is presented by the Erdoğan government not only as totally 'irrational' and detrimental to economic development,<sup>156</sup> but also

<sup>146</sup>Didem Özkiziltan, 'Authoritarian Neoliberalism in AKP's Turkey', 227.

<sup>147</sup>DİSK AR, Sendikalaşma Araştırması: Türkiye'de sendikalaşma, toplu iş sözleşmesi kapsamı ve grevler (2013–2019), DİSK 2019, 12–13

<sup>148</sup>Aziz Çelik, 'Sembiyotik ilişkiler', 51–2.

<sup>149</sup>Mustafa Kemal Coşkun, 'AKP'den işçi sınıfına', 65.

<sup>150</sup>Yunus Furkan Arıcan, 'Sınıf, Siyaset ve Kimlik', 568.

<sup>151</sup>Özge Yurttaş, 'Ocak 2021 istatistiklerinin ışığında (1): Sınıfın ve sendikaların güncel görünümü', *Sendika.Org*, 1.2.2021, <https://sendika.org/2021/02/ocak-2021-istatistiklerinin-isiğında-1-sınıfın-ve-sendikaların-güncel-görünümü-607155/>

<sup>152</sup>Özge Yurttaş, 'Ocak 2021 istatistiklerinin ışığında (2): Sektörel ve örgütsel düzeyde büyüyenler ve daralanlar', *Sendika.Org*, 3.2.2021, <https://sendika.org/2021/02/ocak-2021-istatistiklerinin-isiğında-bir-2-sektörel-ve-örgütsel-duzeyde-buyuyenler-ve-daralanlar-607500/>

<sup>153</sup>Özge Yurttaş, 'Ocak 2021 istatistiklerinin ışığında (3): Sarı sendikacılığın resmi', *Sendika.Org*, 11.2.2021, <https://sendika.org/2021/02/ocak-2021-istatistiklerinin-isiğında-3-sarı-sendikacılığın-resmi-608352/>

<sup>154</sup>Türk-İş had 1,131,749 members and DİSK 193,866 members. Özge Yurttaş, 'Ocak 2021 istatistiklerinin ışığında (1): Sınıfın ve sendikaların güncel görünümü', *Sendika.Org*, 1.2.2021, <https://sendika.org/2021/02/ocak-2021-istatistikleri-nin-isiğında-1-sınıfın-ve-sendikaların-güncel-görünümü-607155/>

<sup>155</sup>Özcan Yıldırım, 'İşçi sendikaları arasında dengeler değişti', *Anadolu Ajansı*, 31.1.2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/eko-nomi/isci-sendikaları-arasında-dengeler-değişt-i/2128875>

<sup>156</sup>Yavuz Yıldırım, 'Anarşistten teröriste, marjinalden çapulcuca: Toplumsal hareketlerin şeytanlaştırılması', in *Öteki'nin var olma sancısı. Türk politik kültüründe şeytanlaştırma eğilimleri*, ed. İsmet Parlak (Bursa: Dora, 2015), 483–4.

as doomed to failure.<sup>157</sup> On other occasions it is presented as the work of ‘secret communist organisations’ or ‘foreign interests’ that guide strikes in order to create chaos, destabilization and social anarchy.

Hak-İş constitutes a structural<sup>158</sup> part of the attempt to demonize the aforementioned collective activity of sections of the workers. Through this function, the confederation creates its own ‘antagonistic other’ that is not the country’s business elite, but class trade unionism.<sup>159</sup> By activating the concept of ‘conflictual trade unionism’, Hak-İş seeks to differentiate, but also to mainly criticize activities of left-wing DİSK,<sup>160</sup> which is the main ‘antagonistic other’ to the identity of conservative trade unionism. DİSK activity is criticized as ‘degrading trade unionism to street politics’<sup>161</sup> and contrary to the effectiveness of social consensus; it cannot represent the true interests of the workers.<sup>162</sup> Just as class antagonism and the politicization of the working class are considered outcomes of the authoritarian westernization of Turkey, so class-oriented action is considered as mimicry and sloganeering that damage the idea of social dialogue and cooperation between employers and employees.<sup>163</sup>

## Conclusions

The purpose of this study is to bring back the issue of social class and the transformations it undergoes in the context of an authoritarian type of government. Particular emphasis was given to the study of the ways in which the Erdoğan government sought to eradicate social class as well as the politicization of working class, so as to be able to build its hegemony over large sections of the labour masses. In essence, this article seeks to complement previous academic research that had focused on the relevance of authoritarianism to Turkey’s neoliberal transformation. It should be stressed that the study of the interconnection of neoliberalism and the intensity of authoritarian methods of government does not only concern state power and state structures. On the contrary, the relation between neoliberalism and authoritarianism has extended to many and different societal sites of capitalist development. The repertoire of authoritarianism, inherent in neoliberal experiences, is broad and includes political, economic and ideological cultural expressions. As Ian Bruff points out, these aspects focus, among other things, on the tendency to construct conflict between people and trade unions and/or between nation and social class.<sup>164</sup>

As in the case of other countries, so in Turkey the AKP government sought, through the Islamic ideological background, to construct an ‘imaginary society of harmony’, a culturally homogeneous whole, within which social differentiations are legitimized and class antagonisms demonized. Based on a broader effort to impose a specific conservative identity for the

<sup>157</sup>Alpkan Birelma, *Ekmek ve Haysiyet Mücadelesi. Günümüz Türkiye’sinde Üç İşçi Hareketinin Etnografisi*, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2014), 26.

<sup>158</sup>Banu Uçkan Hekimler, ‘Türkiye’de olumsuz sendikal algının içsel ve dışsal nedenleri’, *Sosyal Siyaset Konferansları* 68, no. 1 (2015): 134; Mehtap Yılmaz, ‘3. Havalimanı’ndaki tahtakuruları nereli?’, *Yeni Akit*, September 17, 2018, <https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/yazarlar/mehtap-yilmaz/3-havalimanindaki-tahtakurulari-nereli-25803.html>; Fatih Altaylı, ‘Bu isyan normal değil’, *Habertürk*, January 1, 2019, <https://www.haberturk.com/yazarlar/fatih-altayli-1001/2144005-bu-isyan-normal-degil>

<sup>159</sup>Aykut Öztürk, ‘Islamists Against the Class Cleavage’, 464.

<sup>160</sup>*Ibid.*, 464.

<sup>161</sup>İşil Erdinç, ‘AKP döneminde sendikal alanın’, 167.

<sup>162</sup>Bilge Yabancı, ‘Populism as the Problem Child’, 604.

<sup>163</sup>*Hak-İş Dergisi* no. 11 (2016): 88; *Hak-İş Dergisi* no. 16 (2018): 62.

<sup>164</sup>Ian Bruff, ‘The Rise of Authoritarian Neoliberalism’, *Rethinking Marxism* 26, no. 1 (2014): 117.

nation and the new 'desired citizen' (good citizen),<sup>165</sup> AKP aimed for the ideological and political construction of the 'desired worker' of new Turkey. At the same time, it sought to highlight, by means of practical measures and rhetorical forms, the need for the prevalence of a kind of trade unionism adapted to state ideology and reproducing the government social vision.

The aforementioned dynamics, however, managed to prevail, even to a relative degree, due to their dialectic connection to Hak-İş, which constituted the personification of the 'desired trade unionism'. At the same time this particular confederation emerged as a leading force in the process of imposing its own model of trade unionism as a conservative model of social relations. Of course, the creation of conditions for the emergence of the ideological framework of the 'desired worker' demanded the simultaneous construction of the 'antagonistic other'. In this particular case, the 'antagonistic other' is class-oriented trade unionism and subversive activity by organized labour groups. These sections of workers do not fall within the boundaries of national values the government seeks to impose and become the main focus of suppression and ideological marginalization. Therefore, what the present research highlights is that, further to the transformations recorded in the state structures, the connection between neoliberalism and authoritarianism during the AKP government also contains a more intensified denial of any class orientation, as one more form of manipulation and control and over the working class.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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<sup>165</sup>Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, *Turkish Dynamics. Bridge Across Trouble Lands* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 46.