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**“Keep the Wheels Turning”
Politics in Turkey:
Crisis and Labour Regime during
the Age of the Pandemic**

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– “KEEP THE WHEELS TURNING” POLITICS IN TURKEY:
CRISIS AND LABOUR REGIME DURING THE AGE OF THE PANDEMIC –

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Crisis and Labour Regime
during the Age of the Pandemic

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“Keep the Wheels Turning” Politics in Turkey: Crisis and Labour Regime during the Age of the Pandemic

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NIKOS MOUDOUIROS

“KEEP THE WHEELS TURNING”

POLITICS IN TURKEY:

CRISIS AND LABOUR REGIME

DURING THE AGE OF THE PANDEMIC

Abstract:

This paper deals with the policy pursued by the Turkish government during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. The first part briefly examines the global changes in the economy. The second part focuses on the analysis of key aspects of AKP policy. It seeks to decipher the basic orientations of the government, which were expressed under the slogan “Keep the wheels turning”, and to identify how they were expressed in relation to the labour regime. The last part of the paper deals with recording the major impact this policy had on the working class.

Introduction: the pandemic of poverty

The pandemic restored even more intensely and directly the dynamics of the deepening of social and class antagonisms at a worldwide level.

The world found itself at an existential crossroads comprising pandemics, a deep economic recession, catastrophic climate change and extreme inequality. In this context, Covid-19 has been described as the “pandemic of poverty”

Suddenly, humankind found itself in a different world: empty roads, closed shops and unusually clear skies, but also a huge loss of human life. Early reports on the economy were negative, worldwide. The Covid-19 pandemic caused, perhaps, the deepest and most immediate economic recession in the history of capitalism. It developed much faster than the crisis of 2008 or the Great Recession of 1929 (Roubini, 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic may have emerged as a health crisis, but it soon expanded into a huge economic and social crisis. It had a profound effect on everyday life, on the processes of production, reproduction and consumption, both at local and global levels. These developments revealed all the failures of capitalism through a magnifying glass (Stevano et al., 2021). At the same time, they imposed an intense wave of uncertainty on societies, which reached entirely existential dimensions, as well as dimensions associated with the wider stability and economic development (Gökay, 2021, p. 154).

In this sense, the pandemic restored even more intensely and directly the dynamics of the deepening of social and class antagonisms at a worldwide level. Not at all coincidentally, the UN Human Rights Council report, published in the summer of 2020, points out that the world found itself at an existential crossroads comprising pandemics, a deep economic recession, catastrophic climate change and extreme inequality. In this context, Covid-19 has been described as the “pandemic of poverty” (Alston, 2020, p. 9).

According to World Bank data, the world economy shrank by 4.3 per cent in 2020 and is considered the largest recession since World War II (World Bank, 2021, p. 1). Beyond the tragic loss of human life, the World Bank estimated that in 2020, some 124 million people were driven to extreme poverty, while those with a daily income of no more than 5.5 US dollars, reached 210 million (World Bank, 2021, p. 1). The International Labour Organization (ILO) pointed out that in 2020, 255 million full-time jobs were lost, a loss that is four times the size of the one recorded in the 2008 crisis (ILO, 2021a, p. 1). According to the same data, global unemployment reached 6.5 per cent, recording an increase of 1.1 per cent since 2019 and adding another 33 million people to the list of unemployed (ILO, 2021a, p. 9). Job losses and unemployment also had a direct impact on labour income dividends. In 2020, labour incomes fell by 8.3 per cent, equivalent

to about \$3.7 billion and accounting for 4.4 per cent of world GDP (ILO, 2021a, p. 2). From 2019 to 2020 more than 31 million people were pushed into the category of "working poor" – people who work but whose salary does not allow them to lead a decent life, keeping them trapped below the poverty line. In 2020, the year with the strongest impacts of the pandemic, a total of 630 million people fell into the category of the working poor (ILO, 2020, pp. 36–37). At the same time, in early 2020, for the first time in 20 years, a drastic increase in child labour was recorded, with the total number of child labourers reaching 160 million (*Euronews Türkçe*, 2021).

The aforementioned dramatic socio-economic consequences had as a direct consequence a widespread uncertainty, which affected people's daily lives and raised questions about the immediate future (Buğra et al., 2020, p. 140). The Covid-19 pandemic, as well as its management by many governments, challenged people's daily routines and changed the setting in which large sections of society felt even a relative degree of security. This had a negative impact on relations of trust and solidarity, while at the same time raising questions even about basic human freedoms which had, before the pandemic, been taken for granted (Gülseven, 2021, p. 45).

At the geopolitical level, new pursuits were also recorded, often with a highly competitive content (Gülseven, 2021, p. 46). In fact, the problems created by the pandemic for global supply chains raised substantial questions concerning the global architecture of production and trade processes. This in turn prompted new research in many developed and developing countries, especially in relation to China's strategic position in regard to global trade circulation. For example, the US has taken initiatives to move its investments from China to countries such as Taiwan, India and Vietnam (Taştekin, 2020). Right from the beginning of the pandemic, Ankara considered that it could capitalize on the situation, take advantage of its geostrategic position and emerge as an alternative, safeguarding the circulation of trade, production and investment (Öngel, 2021).

In his first address regarding the pandemic early in 2020, Erdoğan characteristically noted that "At this point we cannot know the impact the period we live in will have on mankind. It is very difficult to guess in which direction the world will evolve... It is clear, however, that nothing can remain as it is. We are entering into a period of radical political, economic and social change on a global scale. It is essential for Turkey to take an advantageous position in this photograph" (TCCB, 2020a).

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China's strategic position in regard to global trade circulation. Ankara considered that it could capitalize on the situation, take advantage of its geostrategic position and emerge as an alternative, safeguarding the circulation of trade, production and investment

In these conditions of extreme insecurity and intense antagonism, ontological security acquired a decisive role and was eventually exploited by many political elites for the promotion of authoritarian measures and political orientations (Gülseven, 2021, p. 42). Thus, the anguish that overwhelmed large sections of societies also worked as the basis for the reproduction of war rhetoric on the part of many political and economic elites worldwide.

Erdoğan and Politics of the Pandemic: Keep the wheels turning...

The Covid-19 pandemic hit Turkey at a particularly difficult juncture because of the previous period of economic crisis and destabilization. Up until mid-2018, the country was recording high unemployment rates and a growing current accounts deficit. The credit expansion that took place in 2017 before the referendum caused an intensification of the fragile characteristics of the economy, while the geopolitical tensions of the period increased the outflow of foreign capital, as a result of which the government was unable to restrain the devaluation of the Turkish lira against foreign currencies. Up until the first eight months of 2018, the Turkish lira lost 40 per cent of its value against the dollar. From late 2018 to mid-2019, Turkey's economy shrank (Öngel, 2021).

The pandemic promptly became an issue generating insurmountable problems for labourers in Turkey, as their socio-economic situation had already been hit by the previous period of economic destabilization (Meçik & Aytun, 2020, p. 6). Back in 2019, the unemployment rate in Turkey had already reached 25 per cent (Öngel, 2021). In the same year, the number of working poor was estimated at 3.999 million, recording an increase of 15 per cent from 2017. Thus in 2019, the percentage of working poor in Turkey reached 14.4 per cent of the entire workforce (DİSK/Genel-İş, 2021, p. 6).

According to data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) for 2018, the richest 40 per cent of the population in the country possessed 68.5 per cent of the total national income, while the poorest 40 per cent of the population owned only 16.7 per cent of the national income. Among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member states, Turkey ranked in the third worst position in terms of distribution of income (Akyüz, 2020). The deterioration of income equality was also confirmed by Eurostat data. Specifically, for 2019 the richest 20 per cent of the population of Turkey had profits 8.3 times higher than the poorest 20 per cent (DİSK/Genel-İş, 2021, p. 3).

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According to TÜİK (2017) data, in 2017 the percentage of households living below the poverty line was 20.1 per cent. But for households with two adults and three or more children, that percentage increased to 47.3 per cent. Furthermore, the World Bank reports that the poverty rate in Turkey increased from 8.5 per cent in 2018 to 10.2 per cent in 2019. According to the same data, the total number of people living below the poverty line in Turkey in 2019 increased by 1.5 million in one year, reaching 8.4 million in 2019 (World Bank, 2021, p. 42).

As a result of the consequences of the previous period of crisis, the government of Turkey sought to address the outbreak of the pandemic through a combination of interconnected ideological and political axes with corresponding economic choices. Two of the key axes were as follows. The first was the imposition of an ideological framework of “war”, the successful outcome of which required the mobilization of all citizens in support of state policy. Through this axis the government cultivated the need to protect the country against a “global threat” and called for “national unity” (Gülseven, 2021, p. 52). As a matter of fact, the cultivation of a war climate as a result of the pandemic was combined with the burdensome reminder of the previous economic “attacks” suffered by the country and therefore the framework for the “national mobilization” of society was more easily constructed. Erdoğan described the formula for confronting the pandemic as follows: “Our country, like the rest of the world, is facing a threat that may not have appeared before in world history... As a country and as a nation we have managed to face all the attacks against us so far by strengthening our unity and brotherhood. We will face the coronavirus threat in the same way” (TCCB, Ulusa Sesleniş Konuşması 2020b).

The second axis, interconnected with the first, was the emergence of the need for an unhindered production process, so as to not only address the difficult economic situation as a result of the pandemic but to also enable Turkey to completely overcome the consequences left behind by the 2018 destabilization. In his first comprehensive approach on tackling the pandemic, Erdoğan said: “Apart from the fact that daily life will halt due to voluntary or compulsory quarantine, this process will have serious financial consequences. As Turkey we are obliged to prevent the spread of the pandemic, but also to keep production, trade and employment alive. We are living through a time when we cannot lose control of the economy, since our country has just begun to find its way again after the attacks we suffered in August 2018” (TCCB, Koronavirüsle Mücadele Eşgüdüm Toplantısı Öncesi Yaptıkları Konuşma 2020a).

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The emergence of the need for an unhindered production process, so as to not only address the difficult economic situation as a result of the pandemic but to also enable Turkey to completely overcome the consequences left behind by the 2018 destabilization

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Turkey's "obligation" to prevent the pandemic on the one hand, but to keep production, trade and employment alive on the other, as described by Erdoğan, was codified in the general strategy he called "keep the wheels turning". The specific political statement was made on 30 March 2020 and was characteristic of the priorities set by Ankara in the conditions created by the pandemic: "Our most important sensitivity here is to continue production to sustain the supply of basic goods and support exports. Turkey is a country that needs to continue production and keep the wheels turning under all conditions and circumstances" (TCCB, 2020c).

The need for "employment protection" demonstrated by the Turkish government was understood to be a key result of the unhindered production process

The motto "keep the wheels turning" eventually became the epicentre of an inclination that sought to stabilize the accumulation model in the face of a new global crisis. This insistence by the government was essentially a continuation of its previous choices to postpone the consequences of the more general crisis of the reproduction of society. Just as on previous occasions, especially after 2013, so during the pandemic period the Erdoğan government focused more on crisis-prevention policies through the promotion of labour-intensive sectors and the expansion of credit (Ercan & Oğuz, 2020, p. 106).

It was no coincidence that the need for "employment protection" demonstrated by the Turkish government was understood to be a key result of the unhindered production process and was supported by key business circles in the country (Gülseven, 2021, p. 52). As a matter of fact, Erdoğan himself made no secret of the fact that a primary task of the measures adopted by the government was to facilitate the country's industrialists and export infrastructure to continue the production process (TCCB, 2020d). The head of Zorlu business group assessed the pandemic as a platform of global change where Turkey should attract the interest of the new supply chains to be created. In the same framework, the president of the Machinery Exporters Association (MAİB) suggested that because of the pandemic the trend for changes in the global manufacturing industry chain would intensify, something that should benefit Turkey (Öngel, 2021).

According to Turkish business circles, a key condition for the successful conclusion of the unhindered production process policy under pandemic conditions was to ensure the continuation of the main features of the labour regime. Some of the demands of organized employers were permanent flexibility in the labour market and ensuring teleworking was possible even after the pandemic was over (Karadeniz, 2020). The same was true with the promotion of a cheap labour force. The Istanbul Chamber of Commerce (ITO) prepared a report for foreign investors in order to attract purchase of real estate in Istanbul. Among the main

arguments was the cheap labour force, especially in the manufacturing industry. Specifically, according to ITO, the hourly labour cost in the manufacturing industry is 5.6 dollars in Turkey while in Germany it is 47.2 (T24, 2020).

On a practical level, the government's insistence on the continuation of the production process was expressed through avoiding a total lockdown of the economy, at least for the largest part of 2020. In the early phase of the pandemic, a traffic ban was imposed at weekends, as well as a travel ban between 30 large provinces with particularly high incidence rates. In essence, the government issued recommendations to the citizens to implement a kind of "voluntary quarantine". By means of advertising campaigns like "Turkey: stay at home", it was implicitly emphasized that every citizen should individually apply his or her own self-isolation period (Sariöz-Gökten, 2021).

Among the early measures implemented by the government after the declaration of the coronavirus as a pandemic was the closure of premises connected to night entertainment or the sale of alcohol, followed later by the shutting down of restaurants, barbers, hairdressers and shopping malls (Kurtulmuş, et al., 2020, p. 344). In total, about 270,000 premises were closed down and freedom of movement was only curtailed for those over the age 65 and under the age of 20. (Öktem, 2021, p. 3). Very quickly, however, and despite the quarantine imposed on the specific age-groups, the Ministry of Interior clarified that young workers aged 18–20, both in the public sector and in formal employment in the private sector, were excluded from the restriction (Sariöz-Gökten, 2021). In this way, the government managed to keep most of the workforce active (Gurses, et al., 2021).

On 18 March 2020, Erdoğan announced the first package of measures in response to the pandemic under the name "Economic Stability Shield". It was a set of economic policy measures worth 100 billion Turkish lira (about \$12 billion) (TCCB, 2020a). It included suspension of tax payments, subsidies to boost domestic consumption and a reduction in value-added tax on some products, as well as suspensions of payments to social security and health insurance funds (Gülseven, 2021, pp. 52–53). Therefore, the majority of the measures focused on large and small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), while at the same time government expenditure was kept at 1 per cent of GDP, a particularly small percentage in relation to the size of the country's economy (Gökay, 2021, p. 153).

At the same time, from mid-March 2020, the government enacted the grant of a lump sum of 1000 Turkish lira to households entitled to social assistance (Öktem, 2021, p. 4), while on 30 March, Erdoğan announced the launch of a state charity

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campaign, under the slogan “We are self-sufficient” (*Biz bize yeteriz Türkiye*), with the aim of allocating money to sections of the population who had lost their income (TCCB, 2020c).

The second economy support package was submitted before the National Assembly on 14 April 2020 and included the extension of measures such as the ban on redundancies in conjunction with the enactment of compulsory unpaid leave. In this way the government completed the basic policies related to work, on two axes: the payment of short-term labour compensation (60 per cent of salary) and the ban on redundancies, with enactment of unpaid leave instead (a monthly benefit of 1170 Turkish lira was paid to those placed on unpaid leave) (Öktem, 2021, p. 5).

But the cost of protection of employment, as the most important aspect of the unhindered production process, was passed on to the state and to the workers. The consent of the employers was reached after the dismissal of employees in the form of unpaid leave, with the state providing for the payment of a daily allowance, which, however, was separated from the unemployment fund (Kurtulmuş, et al., 2020, p. 346). Tens of thousands of workers were forced to take unpaid leave during the pandemic, receiving a monthly allowance of 1,170 Turkish lira (around 198 euros, at the then exchange rate of Turkish lira against the euro) from the state – an amount that was about 50 per cent of the minimum wage (DİSK – AR, 2020, p. 8). More specifically, in the period April–June 2020, 1.7 million workers were forced to take unpaid leave (*İleri Haber* 2020), and as of 31 December 2020 the number of workers forced into the same status reached 2,216,622 (Kara, Kaya and Kozan 2021).

By the end of May 2020, more than 270,000 companies that were operating as normal had applied for short-term employment compensation from the state. This amounted to some 2.7 million workers (Kurtulmuş, et al., 2020, p. 346). At the same time, shopping malls, barbers and hairdressers resumed their normal operation, while from June 2020, restaurants, organized beaches, parks and kindergartens were reopened and all internal transport was restored (Sarıöz-Gökten, 2021). The Social Security Institution also issued a directive clarifying that Covid-19 could not fall under the categories of “occupational disease” or “occupational accident”. By this particular regulation the possibility to claim compensation by workers who fell ill with Covid-19, due to continuing to work in conditions of exposure to the disease, was ruled out (Sarıöz-Gökten, 2021). This measure was not accidental, since the exposure of labourers to Covid-19 due to the policy of unhindered production did indeed create additional dynamics in labour reactions. Typically, as of September 2020, the Ankara Chamber of

Medicine had warned that 70 per cent of Covid-19 cases in the capital concerned factory workers, as well as employees of public organizations (İzci, 2020).

The political thesis to “keep the wheels turning” essentially led to the absence of any clear distinction between “essential” and “non-essential” sectors of the economy, an approach followed by other governments. Almost from the beginning of the pandemic in Turkey, industries outside the food and medical industry continued to operate normally, increasing the health risks for a large proportion of workers (Odman, 2021). This was a dynamic development, as in the course of the pandemic the Erdoğan government expanded as much as possible the range of sectors of the economy that were mobilized for the sake of continuous production (World Bank, 2021, p. II). Sectors such as those of construction, mining, the iron industry, the textile/clothing industry, the electrical industry, the furniture industry and export trade – i.e. sectors that were more concerned with stabilizing the accumulation model than meeting basic social needs – continued to operate (Taştekin, 2020). In most cases, in fact, their operation was the result of government intervention through special decrees and permits to employers (Kurtulmuş, et al., 2020, p. 342).

According to DİSK data for the Gaziantep Organized Industrial Zone, the vast majority of the 150,000 workers continued with production from day one of the pandemic. Most businesses easily obtained exemptions from bans by decree from local governors. As a matter of fact, the focus of production was not related to basic social needs in times of a pandemic, but rather concerned wood processing and furniture, charcoal packaging, footwear and clothing (Taştekin, 2020).

The management of the Dardanel factory decided to isolate within its premises those workers who had tested positive for Covid-19 and invoked the provisions of the regulation of the regional council of public health. The workers were moved in full isolation to student dormitories in the area and their transfer to and from the factory was arranged, without being allowed to return home (*El Yazmaları*, 2020a). A similar incident was recorded at a construction site of the Limak contracting company in Artvin province. After the appearance of 100 positive cases among the 2000 employees, the company imposed a quarantine inside the construction site and in this way, for the next 105 days, work continued. The confinement of the workers was the result of a similar decision by the regional public health council (*El Yazmaları*, 2020a). The management of the Sarkuysan factory (a metal works) also decided to continue with production after the detection of positive cases among workers and even managed to suppress the mobilization of protests through a decree by the Kocaeli district administration (Kurtulmuş, et al., 2020, p. 354).

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An important aspect of the “keep the wheels turning” policy includes the measures for increased control and discipline at work.

Another prime example of the control and discipline of labour in the conditions of crisis was the launching of “isolated production zones”.

An important aspect of the “keep the wheels turning” policy, aimed at stabilizing the accumulation model under conditions of crisis, includes the measures for increased control and discipline at work. For example, The Turkish Employers Association of Metal Industries (MESS) promoted the idea of the “electronic collar” as the “technology of the future” that would protect workers and the production process. This is an electronic collar that workers should wear around their neck while on factory production lines and that would send a “warning” in the event distances dictated due to the pandemic were not maintained. In this way the factory managers could more easily control and monitor the production process. Indeed, the use of this technology was observed in some factories by the end of 2020 (Sarıöz-Gökten, 2021).

Another prime example of the increasing trend for control and discipline of labour in the conditions of crisis created by the pandemic was the launching of “isolated production zones” by the Independent Industrialists and Businessmen Association (MÜSİAD). This organization, also known as the organization of Turkey’s Islamic capital, brought back an older proposal, at the heart of which was the guarantee of unhindered production processes, either in the event of a pandemic or in the face of other natural disasters. The renewed proposal was made public in May 2020. Among other things, it provided for the creation of a type of organized industrial area that would host more than 1000 families of workers and would apply quarantine measures without necessarily interrupting factory production (MÜSİAD, 2020). It was a closed workplace, where workers would be isolated and would function as a modernized type of “labour camp”. In this way, the pandemic and its management by the Erdoğan government revived the question of the relative separation between the employee’s private residence and the production space (*El Yazmaları*, 2020a).

The expansion of credit channels was another key pillar of the AKP’s policy to support the economy. So-called “financial inclusion”, which had been a central pillar of the AKP’s economic policy since the beginning of its rule, continued to be promoted as a solution to the adverse conditions resulting from the pandemic. The focus of this policy was the banking sector, through the encouragement of credit expansion throughout 2020. Thus, the “keep the wheels turning” policy was supplemented by the so-called “social policy by other means”, which relied on deferrals of loan instalments and the granting of subsidized loans, especially by state-owned banks. In fact, according to the International Monetary Fund, Turkey was among the countries with the

smallest state sponsorships for combating the pandemic (Yücel, 2021). These policies led to one of the largest credit expansions worldwide in 2020 (World Bank, 2021, p. I). At the same time, they led to a new phase of household over-indebtedness. For example, in April 2020 alone, about one million people received a loan, and of those, 920,000 were people who had applied to banks for consumer loans for the first time (Sarıöz-Gökten, 2021). By June 2021, personal loans from banks and the Housing Development Administration of the Republic of Turkey (TOKI) reached 965.9 billion Turkish lira, of which 172.3 billion are credit card debts (Evrensel, 2021b).

Impact on the working class in Turkey

It is a fact that the main political orientation of the Erdoğan government during the pandemic led to a relative economic recovery, in fact much improved in relation to many G20 countries. Turkey's GDP for 2020 increased by 1.8 per cent (World Bank, 2021, p. I). The growth trend of the economy continued into the first quarter of 2021 at a rate of 7 per cent, the highest among OECD member states (*Yeni Şafak*, 2021). The main axis of this relative recovery was the increase in industrial production (Öngel, 2021). From June 2020 until May 2021, industrial production recorded a steady increase. Specifically, in May 2021 the annual increase of industrial production reached 40.7 per cent (TÜİK, 2021).

Nevertheless, it is also a fact that this particular growth trend in the economy did not lead to an improvement in the situation of labourers, nor to a reduction in poverty levels. This was mainly a growth based on the increase in consumer loans and expenses, without creating new jobs or general trends for increasing employment. (*BirGün*, 2021). For example, according to data from the Turkish Statistical Institute, in the first quarter of 2021 business revenues increased by 3.9 per cent compared to the same period in 2020, while the employee dividend decreased by 3.5 per cent compared to the first quarter of 2020 (DİSK-AR, *İşçiler büyümeden pay alamadı!* 2021a). The World Bank figures moved in the same direction, emphasizing that in the conditions of the pandemic in 2020, another 1.6 million people in Turkey were driven into poverty, recording an increase in the poverty rate from 10.2 per cent in 2019 to 12.2 per cent in 2020 (World Bank, 2021, p. 43).

Another dramatic development was the increase in the loss of full-time jobs throughout the pandemic. From the beginning of 2020 until June 2021, a total of 3.613 million full-time jobs were lost in Turkey, a number that

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...the Covid-19 pandemic did not have the same consequences for all social strata and classes in Turkey

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The pandemic eventually turned into a pandemic for labourers.

corresponds to 13.2 per cent (DİSK-AR, 2021b). The World Bank points out that job losses decisively affected the poorest sections of the country’s population. It was estimated that 60 per cent of job losses concerned the poorest 40 per cent of the population. On the contrary, most of the upper income strata retained their jobs, while a proportion of them managed to increase their profits (World Bank, 2021, p. 43). According to DİSK data, by July 2021 rising unemployment in Turkey had reached 23.6 per cent, a percentage corresponding to 8.4 million unemployed (DİSK-AR, 2021c).

As understood in the above, the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the management of its effects by the government, did not have the same consequences for all social strata and classes in Turkey. The pandemic did not, of course, choose to hit specific social classes, but it is impossible to argue that its adverse impact was equally shared by the rich and the poor. The Erdoğan government’s basic orientation to continue production created an environment in which most workers were forced to continue working and thus be exposed to Covid-19. The “voluntary” nature of the quarantine created grounds for new discriminations in relation to which parts of society could indeed be restricted, either by not working or working from home (Kurtulmuş, et al., 2020, p. 354). From the beginning of the pandemic only 24 per cent of the country’s total workforce were able to work from home (Meçik & Aytun, 2020, p. 3).

Under the weight of the aforementioned consequences the pandemic eventually turned into a pandemic for labourers. Freelancers, the self-employed, workers in the informal sector, and workers in factories and small shops, did not have the opportunity for “self-isolation and protection”, as this would lead to loss or reduction of their income (*El Yazmaları*, 2020b). In this way, the slogan “Turkey stay at home” essentially referred to a situation in which total protection from the pandemic was one more class privilege. Characteristically, 741 Covid-19-related deaths of workers were recorded in 2020, amounting to 31 per cent of all accidents at work in the same year. During the period from March 2020 to March 2021, 861 Covid-19 related deaths of workers were recorded (İSİG, 2021). During the same period, another 391 health workers lost their lives to the pandemic (DİSK, 2021).

The development of the pandemic, in combination with the management and the choices made by the government in dealing with the economic consequences in Turkey, has left behind rifts in relation to the political system itself. The Erdoğan government had been facing a number of problems for

some time and these have now been amplified. Its decline has been made more acute and it seems that since the beginning of 2021 this has triggered the estrangement of a significant part of the electoral core of the ruling coalition. Irrespective of the specific course and its final outcome at electoral level, it is a fact that the era of the pandemic leaves behind most profound changes in social relations throughout Turkey, with the challenge to the myth of Erdoğan’s absolute supremacy at its core.

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