



Voices from a hidden people: Precarious lives and discrimination in Turkish sugar industry



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to reveal the connections between precarious work and discrimination patterns in Turkey, drawing particular attention to the increasing use of subcontracting in the public sector. Subcontracting has been suggested as a liberal solution to labour effectiveness that is substantially concretised in further surplus value accumulation. This suggestion has been inextricably associated with disposing of labour features heretofore valid such as a settled income, a guarantee of minimum standards, protection against unfair dismissal, promotion opportunities, a regular working day and working week, collective bargaining, and the provision of social services. This alteration has inevitably exposed labour to further exploitative competition on the one hand and fragmented the labour source by expanding it to further fragile categories on the other. Thus, subcontracting has immediate consequences not only for precarisation of work, but also for discriminatory practices in workplaces. The study's results indicate that subcontracting in Turkey essentially meant a return to traditional cleavages between gender roles, local people and internal migrants, and permanent workers and precarious ones, even in the state-owned enterprises.

1. Introduction

Current managerial prescriptions apparently have little doubt about the role of subcontracting as a tool to minimize costs and improve efficiency (Kelman, 2008; Kettl, 2000; Roca-Puig et al., 2015). Central to this line of thought is to connect subcontracting as a strategic rationale for private sector initiatives or in some cases to the overall growth of state run-business (Kimura, 2002; Sacchetti and Sugden, 2003; Van Mieghem, 1999). On the other hand, there have been concomitant concerns about the growth of precarious work beyond its limits and its immediate ominous impacts on the everyday lives of workers worldwide (Bujold and Fournier, 2008; Kalleberg, 2012; McKay et al., 2011; Shin, 2012; Vosko, 2010; Wilson and Ebert, 2013). The rationale behind the subcontracting has thus meant the end of a world symbolised by a settled income, a guarantee of minimum standards, protection against unfair dismissal, promotion opportunities, a regular working day and working week, collective bargaining, and the provision of social services (Kalleberg and Hewison, 2013: 283; Vosko, 2010: 3-5). To put it another way, the social relations of labour are no longer bound by or defined by the nation state (Fairbrother and Rainnie, 2006: 4). Even the state-owned enterprises have largely shed their social protection functions for their workers (Bardhan, 2006). Today, they are “subject to

tight budgets and it is difficult to find expenses to cut. It is, however, easier to cut personnel expenses than other fixed expenses” (Kiil and Knutsen, 2016: 109). By and large these explanations emphasize two different aspects of the subject. However, what is missing in these accounts is the fact that subcontracting creates a new and intersecting discrimination patterns in the workplace.

There has also been a notable tendency regarding subcontracting to emphasize discrimination against disadvantaged groups such as temporary workers, disabled workers, younger and older workers, female workers, and migrant and minority ethnic workers (Burrows, 2013; Landivar, 2015; McDowell et al., 2009; Moore et al., 2012; Prowse and Prowse, 2015; Sheppard, 2011). In this sense, subcontracting has immediate consequences not only for the precarisation of work, but also for discriminatory practices in workplaces. As E. Reid-Musson argued in a recent intervention, understanding contemporary workplace relations involves a close encounter between precarity and discrimination: “While the state and capital actively produce differences within the working class through labour market segmentation and national citizenship, the working class itself has also promoted exclusions along lines of gender, race, and citizenship, in part driving the making of migrant precarity” (Reid-Musson, 2014: 163).

Some recent works of labour geographers have provided valuable

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insights to the relationship between precarious employment and discrimination (Enright and Pemberton, 2016; Gutelius, 2015; Hastings and MacKinnon, 2017; Kiil and Knutsen, 2016; McGrath, 2013; Rutherford, 2010; Seo and Skelton, 2017; Strauss, 2017; Strauss and McGrath, 2017; Walton-Roberts, 2008; Yea, 2017). Rutherford (2010: 768), for example, linked precarious employment with the restructuring of capitalism and drew attention to the disruption of stable employment via outsourcing, downsizing and the blurring of enterprises. Kiil and Knutsen (2016: 109) emphasized the erosion of egalitarian wage politics in Swedish public sector and identified that “Highly skilled public sector employees earned much less than highly skilled private sector employees, while low-skilled public sector employees earned much more than low-skilled private sector employees”. Gutelius (2015: 60) pointed to the growth of temporary staffing industry and underlined discrimination by stressing that “At the low-skill, low-wage end of the labour market, the employment practices of distribution firms and temp agencies do not simply reflect labour market inequality that already exists, but have the tendency to further aggravate these inequities”. Enright and Pemberton (2016) devoted particular attention to the role of smaller subcontracting agencies. They (2016: 9) argued that these agencies, “are able to exploit their knowledge of local labour markets” to sabotage formal contractual relations. In some instances, some agencies were particularly reluctant to sign formal contracts of employment with migrant workers (Wang, 2011). This highlighted a further crucial connection in the precariousness debate: that of the migrant workers.

Conducting her research in Ontario farms, Reid-Musson (2014: 169) concluded that “much seasonal and temporary work on Ontario farms... is filled through managed transnational migration programs”. The study findings of Sallie Yea (2017) elaborated the experiences of migrant workers of subcontracting firms in Singapore. Here, Yea (2017: 186) indicated to the arbitrary imposition of strategies by companies to discipline migrant workers: “those companies undertake routinely to exploit workers’ financial and labour positions (such as illegal monthly salary deductions or incorrect calculation of overtime). An even more pathetic example came from McGrath (2013). In her research on migrant sugar cane workers in Brazil, she described them as “slave labour”. Slave labour here refers to “a system of forced labour resulting from debt bondage and internal (and more recently cross-border) trafficking” (McGrath, 2013: 35).

Regarding precarious employment, another concern among labour geographers is the gendered distinctions and their implications. Based on a study of highly skilled immigrants in Norway, Aure (2013), for example, drew attention to gendered expectations and norms that make it difficult for women to enter the labour market. Strauss and McGrath (2017: 202) directly addressed the link between the erosion of the standard employment norms (SER) and women precariousness. They claimed that “the SER has not disappeared, but historical characteristics of women’s employment (e.g. part-time hours, low pay, temporary and casual forms of labour market attachment) have become normalized through labour market ‘flexibilisation’.

Last but not least, as Strauss (2017: 2) put it, today there is a “growing body of work on precarity in labour geography has emerged out of engagements with feminist theory and migrant labour”. Werner et al. (2017: 3) have very recently pointed out that “Feminist work in economic geography challenges the persistent neglect of gender and social difference within the conceptual terrain of the sub-discipline, and connects these patterns to labour practices and the politics of knowledge production in the academy”. After a few lines, they have also expressed that “the integration of FPE [Feminist Political Economy] approaches within economic geography to date has been both sporadic and, at times, inadequately rigorous” (2017: 3).

Based on the theoretical framework outlined above, this article will try to reveal the connections between precarious work and ensuing discrimination patterns in Turkey, drawing particular attention to the increasing use of subcontracting in state-owned sugar factories. The

study aims to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the labour geography of precariousness by carrying out an exploration of the different dimensions of discrimination. For this purpose, we turn to the concept of “multiple discrimination” as a comprehensive framework to address and integrate various types of discriminatory practices against precarious workers. As Uccellari (2008: 24) asserted, “people are multi-dimensional and so cannot be classified according to, or defined by, a single characteristic... Any one of an individual’s attributes, or any combination of them, may, therefore, form the basis of discrimination”. Understanding discrimination in the labour market, for Ruwanpura (2008: 77), “is no longer about uncovering simple and dualistic links between two sets of social groups, such as men versus women, blacks versus whites, or able versus the disabled. It is increasingly apparent that the nature and dynamics of discrimination are complex because the multiple positions occupied by people are shaped by numerous social attributes”. In that sense, the central importance of employing a multiple discrimination framework is that “it requires our active engagement and recognition of the interface between institutions and social categories that uni-dimensional investigations... easily tend to overlook” (Ruwanpura, 2008: 98-99).

The remainder of the article has been organized as follows. Section 2 presents an analytical framework of the relationship between precarious work and discrimination. Dealing particularly with the informalisation of employment relations in the state sector, Section 3 summarizes the historical background of industrial relations in Turkey. This is followed by an outline of the research method employed. Section 5 presents the findings of the study and covers three items reflecting various discrimination practices in the workplace between: (i) permanent, seasonal and subcontracted workers, (ii) male and female workers, and (iii) local and internal migrant workers. Finally, conclusions of the study are presented in Section 6.

2. Understanding precarious work and multiple discrimination

Throughout most of the 20th century, “standard employment” was a dominant form of employment in state owned enterprises and it was used to refer to

Situations where employers provide an employment contract, which sets out a long-term commitment to full-time employment. Typically, a number of conditions are attached to this contract: regular hours and pay, the provision of a designated workplace, with pension and sick pay arrangements and often the opportunity to join a trade union. (Bradley et al., 2002: 52)

The term “precarious employment”, however, has recently received considerable worldwide attention among scholars from various disciplines. It is noticeable that many companies today have reduced their dependence on traditional open-ended employment contracts, and differentially increased their hiring of part-time, flexible and otherwise contingent labour (Hassard et al., 2009:10). In this respect, precarious employment is simply defined as “work for remuneration characterised by uncertainty, low income, limited social benefits and statutory entitlements” (Vosko, 2010: 2). Furthermore, it has been classified by increasing unemployment (Standing, 2013), diversification of labour source through migration at the interstices of precarious citizenship (Reid-Musson, 2014:162; Strauss and McGrath, 2017), and by gendered and classed vulnerabilities (Rigg et al., 2016:66; Ye, 2014:184). Here, the high uncertainty or unpredictability of work refers mainly to the ever-shifting regulatory schemes of the business world. Thus, “the term of contract can be used to distinguish various precarious workers from full-time, permanent workers” (Shin, 2012: 6; Standing, 2013: 2).

Considering the case subject of this study, two types of contract come to the fore in the recent EU Directives. The first one defines a fixed-term (or temporary) worker as:

A person having an employment contract or relationship entered

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