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Looking for Student Activists

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Trade Union Strategies and Legacy of the 1960s in Student Mobilization in Turkey: The Case of the Student Youth Union *Öğrenci Gençlik Sendikası* (Genç-Sen)

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This article is based on a master's degree dissertation in political science in the program of "MPhil Political Sociology and Institutions", presented in July 2011 at University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne in France. See; ERDINC, Isil, *L'Organisation et la mobilisation des étudiants : Le syndicat étudiant Genç-Sen, comme la rencontre des anciens et des nouveaux acteurs sociaux dans la Turquie de post-1980*[The organization and the mobilization of students in Turkey of post 1980s : Genç-Sen, the student union, as the meeting of the old and new contentious actors], Master 2 Recherche Sociologie et Institutions du Politique, Département de Science Politique, Université de Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, France, Juin 2011.

- 1 Turkey has long been experiencing profound changes affecting both political and social life. Consecutive coups and military interventions in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997 have significantly affected social mobilizations and left-wing politics in Turkey. New groups such as homosexuals, women, environmentalists and students now rally in public space and on media platforms while the notion of "civil society" is being employed more often in order to ensure international legitimacy, to obtain funding from the European Union and to protect themselves from repression (Dorronsoro, 2005: 14, 15). Since the coup of September 12, 1980, most of the political parties, associations and unions were dissolved and strict limits were imposed on trade union rights. As a result, over the

past two decades collective action in Turkey has been analyzed from the paradigm of the new social movements. Despite the deterioration of living conditions, the anti-democratic practices in universities and increasing unemployment rates among young graduates, college students found themselves barely able to mobilize.

- 2 Demet Lüküslü states that the youth of the post-1980 period are usually accused of being apolitical and not interested in what is going on around them. Unlike the youth of the 1960s and 1970s, the young people of the 1980s and 1990s preferred creating new kinds of organizations rather than participating in mainstream political parties (Lüküslü, 2005). Youth branches of political parties, youth sections of Islamic associations and Non-governmental Organizations became organizations where young people come together and socialize. Student organizations that held political claims were gathered mostly for a demonstration or a certain demand rather than organizing in a centralized rigid way. Demonstrations for the defense of headscarves in universities, student associations, and coordinated student actions marked this period of reconstruction of the social movements' space. It can be stated that even if there were different associations and mobilizations among students between 1980 and 2000, it was hard to incorporate a significant part of the youth in a centralized massive movement¹. As for the university system, new rules are implemented with new regulations and the constitution of 1982. İlhan Tekeli argues that the fear from students was decisive; "The University was considered as the source of all sickness because of its inability to reproduce itself and solve its own problems. Thus, it had to calm them down with new courses and new rules." (Tekeli, 2010: 204). Tekeli quotes Kenan Evren, the commander of the armed forces, who declared in a speech in 1980 that "The University had become the hearth of anarchism and terror. We need to take measures so that they could become real institutions of education." (Tekeli, 2010: 204).
- 3 In this political context, the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey, *Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu* (DİSK²), found itself in a renewal process during the 2000s. Traditional forms of collective action and trade unions were trying to rebuild themselves and regain their force. Thus, the combination of these two processes resulted in the foundation of the first student union in Turkey, *Öğrenci Gençlik Sendikası* (Genç-Sen), in 2007 with the initiative of DİSK and by a group of student activists from various protest movements and left-wing political parties. *Genç-Sen's* founding members aimed to bring together students from different political fractions, disciplines, universities, countries and cities. By the end of 2010, students' interest vis-à-vis the union grew stronger with the increasing state repression. Other youth groups began to support the union by participating in their demonstrations or by giving joint press statements as the union got more radical. The union opened branches in different cities in Turkey except in the East and Southeast. Even if the exact number of members of the union is not certain since the union is still in an institutionalization phase and rarely keeps official registers of its members, it includes thousands of students throughout Turkey³.
- 4 This project seeks to understand how *Genç-Sen* emerged from alliances between old and new actors on the left in Turkey during the 2000s. It further seeks to understand to what extent *Genç-Sen* introduced innovations in the collective action repertoire of protest in Turkey. Thus, my aim is to learn why, among all the other student associations and organizations in Turkey in the 2000s, *Genç-Sen* was the first and, until now, the only student union founded by a labour union confederation on a class

struggle basis with traditional collective action strategies and claims. My research is based on fieldwork including field observations as well as semi-directed interviews with four trade unionists and eleven unionized students that I conducted in Turkey in February and March 2011. Through this fieldwork, I analyze the union's emergence, identity and mobilization strategies⁴.

- 5 In the first part of this article, I will explain how the paths of the worker movement and student movement crossed and resulted in the emergence of *Genç-Sen*. Then I will examine the construction of demands and claims of unionized students. In the second part, I will study the mobilization strategies and their evolution over a four-year time period. I will analyze the identity of unionized students in order to understand how the union gained a unique and hybrid form of political engagement among students with the traditions of the labour confederation and the 1960s and 1970s' social movements. This way, it will be possible to analyze how new forms of collective action and engagement during the 2000s do not necessarily bring new discourses or repertoires since there are more continuities than ruptures in some organizations and movements due to alliances and legacies⁵.

I. *Genç-Sen*: Emergence of a new model of engagement?

- 6 The project of creating a student union dates back to the beginning of the 2000s when the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions, *DİSK*, declared at its 11th General Congress "the necessity to organize among different social groups such as retirees, housewives, the unemployed and youth" in order to reinforce social movements⁶.
- 7 The 2000s can be considered as a period of decline of trade unions and of the labour movement. That's why it is possible to state that the trade unions and activists tried to create new strategies to reinforce themselves. Yıldırım Koç insists that the years 2001-2010 were marked with the decline of the labour movement and trade unionism (Koç, 2010: 453). He indicates that the 2000s were full of defeats for the working class, arguing that the weakening of demonstrations, accelerating privatization, wage cuts, the economic crisis of 2001 and the government of Justice and Development Party all had negative effects on workers (Koç, 2010: 431, 432). Thus, Fikret Sazak points out that there was a "trade unionism crisis" during this period, discussing new strategies to get out of this crisis (Sazak, 2006). Ayşe Buğra discusses the emergence of new forms of trade unions due to the emergence of new forms of work like "white collar workers", sportsmen, artists, farmers, salesmen and saleswomen as well (Buğra, 2010: 7-33).
- 8 Therefore, the study of *Genç-Sen* and its activities will help us understand not only the dynamics of student youth but also the evolution of trade unionism in Turkey during the 2000s.

Who are the unionized students? : The formation of social networks

- 9 In 2000, *DİSK* decided to create trade unions for housewives, retired workers, the unemployed and the youth in order to broaden its support in society and in political life. However, this decision took some time to be implemented. It was not until 2005 and the student protests in France against the CPE (First Job Contract)⁷ for the process

to actually come together⁸. “We have seen that students' unions were the main actors of the mobilizations in France and it was noted that youth in Turkey needed to organize as well,” says the director of the department of organization of *DİSK*⁹. In addition, the director of the international relations department of *DİSK*, who was an important figure in founding the union, also cites the example of the success of student mobilizations organized by student unions in Greece in 2006 protesting against the commercialization of education in order to highlight the importance of a student struggle against neoliberal policies¹⁰.

- 10 Beyond the influence of the international context, a national event seems to have played a major role: Music Festival *BarışaRock* organized in Istanbul by a group of activists from antiwar movement to protest “the war, occupation, racism, nationalism and imperialism”¹¹. The junction between festival organizers and union leaders is somewhat fortuitous. The director of organization of *DİSK* says: “10 factory workers of Coca Cola were dismissed because of their affiliation with the trade union attached to *DİSK* in 2005. They were on strike since June 2005. We saw that there was a protest against a rock festival sponsored by Coca Cola and we had decided to go there in August 2006 with thirty workers, taking our tents like youngsters. It was funny because the 40 to 50 year old workers were faced with young people aged 20 or 25 years with long hair and weird piercings, listening to rock, but protesting their dismissal, sharing their cause and having problems with the capitalist system in their world. We then started thinking about the need for reconciliation and renewal of the bond of solidarity between young people and workers in Turkey”¹².
- 11 The director of the international relations department, aged 31, tells the story of his involvement in the project of a students' union: “The director of organization of *DİSK* proposed to the youngest people working within the confederation to start working on establishing a student union. We began studying international examples and the condition of students in Turkey to determine the union's strategy and issues about which students needed to get engaged. After several months of research, we made an appeal on behalf of *DİSK* to youth branches of political parties from the left and to various student organizations. The young people who responded to our call gathered in the office of the Confederation in Istanbul and we started to organize meetings to discuss the nature, objectives and potential problems of a student union in Turkey”.
- 12 During one year and a half, students coming from different left-wing associations, political journals and parties, met at the headquarters of *DİSK* and discussed the aims and the structure of a student union that was going to be a part of a labour union confederation. The young trade unionists working at *DİSK* directed the meetings and also took part during the debates. The differences between the political views of the students caused differences in their perception of a student union. There were some student groups who wanted the union be more autonomous from the labour confederation whereas there were those who thought that the labour union's presence was rather positive. In addition to this, some of the students were in favor of founding a union based on university students' demands and needs while others argued that the union must represent all the young people. These debates made the process of establishing the union longer and also caused the departure and disengagement of some student groups, parties and associations from the initial meetings. In this context, it is possible to state that both trade unionists from *DİSK* and students coming from

different political fractions, universities and departments played an important role in the process of founding the union and the construction of its identity, claims and aims.

- 13 After long discussions, those who had agreed on the importance of creating a student union organized a large founding congress in Ankara at the Middle East Technical University (ÖDTÜ) in 2007. About 500 students from 30 different universities, departments, cities and left-wing political organizations came to Ankara to participate, using the financial support of *DİSK* for their transport and accommodation¹³. The first student organization with a form of a “student union” was founded in 2007 and agreed on basic principles of the union¹⁴. Thus, the student union can be defined as a result of the articulation of traditional and new actors of social protest. This situation could also be observed in the formation of the claims, demands and mobilization strategies of the union.

Political engagement within *Genç-Sen*: Some claims and techniques in the repertoires of collective action

- 14 The student union started its activities in 2008 with street demonstrations against the trial of closure of *Genç-Sen*, opened by the Governor's Office of Istanbul in June 2008¹⁵. Students defended their right to found a student union¹⁶. The branch of *Genç-Sen* in Bolu staged a sit-in with six students in a protest against the trial and they organized a demonstration outside the Labour Court on the day of the trial with the support of *DİSK*, various unions attached to *DİSK*, the teachers' union *Eğitim-Sen*, representatives of the Union of the retired, *Emekli-Sen* which was closed by the court a year before and one of the leaders of the youth movement of the 1960s, the revolutionary youth, *Dev-Genç*, Ertuğrul Kürkçü. They organized synchronized protests against the trial in 25 cities, including Ankara, Balıkesir, Bolu, Çanakkale, Eskişehir, Hatay, Istanbul, Izmir, Izmit, Kütahya, Manisa, Mersin, Muğla, Samsun, and Zonguldak. They expressed their right to create a student union before the second session of the trial. These demonstrations and the claim to obtain the right to found a student union in form of a labour union on a class basis are new pieces in the collective action repertoires of the student movement in Turkey. Engaging around student issues and defining itself as an “öğrenci sendikası” by using the notion of “sendika” which means “trade union” is new to the student organizations since the beginning of the 1960s, the groups are named mostly as “dernek” (association), “federasyon” (federation), “kulüp” (club), “birlik” (union), “koordinasyon” (coordination), “platform” (platform), or “kolektif” (collective). The use of the organizational form “sendika” (trade union) is crucial in this context. The claim of student unionism about the identity of students is meaningful. According to the founding charter of student unionism, the Charter of Grenoble, accepted at a conference in France on 24 April 1946 by student representatives, the students are “young intellectual workers”¹⁷. They have the right to unionize. It is stated that the universe of work and youth presents the basis of an economic and social revolution and the students should fight against every kind of oppression and defend liberties. Therefore, despite the family backgrounds of the students and even if the students who do not come from working class families, the students themselves belong to the working class. Not only is studying considered as a work in itself but also most of the students find themselves immediately in the job market in order to finance their education. The precarious positions of young people, students and workers, their exploitation in the work market as interns and as a free workforce, the rising

unemployment rates among graduates, the fragile conditions of research assistants and student assistants in universities and the status of students with scholarships or loans are the main factors that might lead to the consideration of young students as a part of the working class and as actors in the class struggle. Hence, the construction of the student identity as a class actor is important in the analysis of student unions which makes the choice of *Genç-Sen* to call itself “labour union”, or “sendika” in Turkish, remain meaningful.

- 15 As to the expansion of *Genç-Sen*, throughout my research, I observed that the mobilization potential of the union is not the same in all universities and departments. Istanbul University, ODTÜ and Istanbul Technical University (İTÜ) were the universities where it is easy to develop the union because of the fact that they were universities historically engaged politically, especially during the 1960s and 1970s. There are also universities like University of Ankara or University of Gazi in Ankara where rightwing organizations and associations are more visible and where it is harder to develop the union. The students of some of the private universities were not easy to be convinced by the union neither. As to the departments, one of the unionized students declared,

“We have members from all the departments but mostly from the departments of engineering, philosophy and law. The students in fine arts are not interested in politics. Social sciences students are more likely to become a member but it depends on the university. Social sciences students in private universities are not interested at all with politics or trade unions but in public universities like Istanbul University it is easier to convince them to join the union”¹⁸.

- 16 During 2009, *Genç-Sen* protested against the government's decision to increase the cost of tuition fees by 500% by organizing demonstrations in Istanbul, Mersin, Ankara, Konya, Adana and Eskişehir where they protested against education fees that made education a “privilege of the rich”. They organized a large demonstration in Istanbul with the participation of 300 activists from the unions attached to *DİSK* and the parents of students. In addition, they organized events on twelve campuses in different universities over the problem of transportation in Istanbul, Izmir, Eskişehir, Aydın, Sakarya, Ankara and Hatay, four demonstrations over the problem of accommodation in Istanbul and Izmir and two, and actions protesting the prices of restaurants in Universities of Izmir and Kocaeli which are the major cities of Turkey hosting a large number of students from other cities. They protested against the implementation of video-surveillance at Anadolu University in Eskişehir in April 2010. They gave their support to high school students by protesting against the injustices in university entrance exams. They organized a “Labour Week” by inviting Süleyman Çelebi (president of *DİSK* at that time) to Istanbul University and a panel called “The Student Movement in Turkey from 1968 to Our Time” in Okan University in Istanbul in 2009 (Erdoğan, 2012: s. 226). Moreover, in the beginning of the school year 2010-2011, they organized a demonstration in order to protest against tuition fees, commercialization of universities, and the privatization of university restaurants whilst defending “education in one's mother tongue” (Pelek, 2010). The most significant and regular activity of *Genç-Sen* can be considered to be the demonstrations against Yükseköğretim Kurulu, YÖK (Council for Higher Education) organized every year on the 6th of November, anniversary of the foundation of the Council. The demonstrations against YÖK are organized by branches of *Genç-Sen* involving even the rival political student groups who are in fact opposed to the idea of a student union or who define themselves as ideologically different from *Genç-Sen*.



Map of Turkey

- 17 However, when it comes to social or cultural activities of the union, which can be considered as part of the “new” forms of activities, there are two contradicting opinions among the unionized students. On one hand, Burak, 21, says “If we have sufficient resources, we would like to organize these kinds of activities in order to attract the students’ attention to our Union. But for now, we have neither the material nor the human resources to organize such events and it is difficult to get permission from university administration as well”.¹⁹ On the other hand, Emre, 27, argues: “We are not here to entertain the students. Activism is a serious and important duty and we cannot spend our resources and energy organizing parties and concerts in which students will not pay any attention or will not feel any responsibility for what happens in the world or in their country”²⁰. Therefore, it can be said that the student movement is still in a period of construction since they don’t always agree on their techniques of collective action repertoire and functions of the Union.
- 18 To sum up, the union members are trying to mobilize “new” students around the issues concerning the student universe while finding it indispensable to maintain their links with *DİSK* and left-wing political activism as well. They are willing to integrate themselves into the new social movements and organizations by adopting “new” and more original ways to mobilize the students. In addition to this, they tend to keep the traditions of the student movement during the 1960s and the 1970s by having a more political and ideological attitude about what a student union must do.

II. In search of a student unionism with a left-wing political axis

- 19 *Genç-Sen* found itself in a phase of constant evolution in search of a common identity and political view. With the influence of the tradition of the labour confederation and of the students who were already engaged in different political parties, *Genç-Sen* put itself in a left-wing political axis on the political scale²¹. Influenced by different factors, it could be seen that activism in *Genç-Sen* has evolved over time as the union redefined its identity and discourse. Thus, it is important to analyze firstly the radicalization process of students with the increasing state repression vis-à-vis the university and social movements and then the evolution of activist identity among unionized students.

Union strategies and street demonstrations: The radicalization of Genç-Sen against repression

- 20 *Genç-Sen* began to get more radical from the beginning of 2010. Students aimed to protest against police violence, student arrests and disciplinary investigations in universities and defend worker rights in different factories. Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow highlight four types of regimes using the variables, “ability” and “democracy” whose degree of weakness or strength determines the magnitude of contentious political action (Tarrow and Tilly, 2008). They explain that if a state is strong and nondemocratic and the citizens have only meager political rights or the rights are unevenly distributed, forms of conflict will be characterized by subterfuge and even brief confrontations are usually halted through repression (Tarrow and Tilly, 2008: 102-105). In this context, it could be said that the State of the Republic of Turkey could be considered as a state whose ability to intervene is high while the rights and liberties are weak. Therefore, opposition to the state is marginalized and conflicts are usually met with police violence, which in turn, provokes frustration and increased radicalization. Olivier Fillieule states that the rupture between two collective action repertoires must be read as a “stylization” but not as an exact description of a historical reality because behind this question, there is the question of identification and hierarchization of the factors of the repertoire's transformation (Fillieule, 2010). However, a nuance between the preponderance of the role of the state as a central actor affecting collective action repertoires and the importance of individual trajectories, institutional resources and interactions must be made in order to understand correctly the mobilization dynamics of *Genç-Sen*. Fillieule points out “One of the ways to go beyond the metaphorical use of Tilly’s conception of repertoire, one should analyze the role of the available means that can be used and the vague coupling of structural constraints, practical dilemmas and strategic interactions by exploring in a deepened way, the way that the individuals invest their know-how, their motivations and their perceptions in these forms” (Fillieule, 2010: p. 94, 95). The action is surely integrated in a larger whole, tied by a series of structural constraints limiting the field of political possibilities but the reasons why the individuals prefer a certain type of action strategy rather than choosing another one is also an important subject of research. Therefore, in the analysis of *Genç-Sen*’s evolution, the role of the state and police violence play major roles but the students that are engaged and the resources available to them are also crucial since the ideological references of the 1960s and the 1970s as well as the material resources of *DİSK* play also a decisive role on their ways to adapt themselves to structural changes and governmental policies.
- 21 In this context, *Genç-Sen* organized twelve demonstrations to denounce repression in universities in Adana, Istanbul, Ankara, Eskişehir, Denizli, Izmir, Bursa and in almost all other branches of the union during the year 2010. They protested against the installation of video surveillance cameras and private security at the campus in April 2010 in Eskişehir at Anadolu University. They tried to educate students about the issues of unemployment and uncertainty about their future by opening information desks at Eskişehir Osmangazi University, denouncing the suicide of a young graduate from Uludağ University in Bursa because of unemployment and organizing a conference on “college graduates’ unemployment” at Kocaeli University. The students union also protested the suspension of two members of the union at Yıldız Technical University in

Istanbul by declaring a common press statement at the University of Istanbul, Marmara in Istanbul, Çukurova in Adana and Karadeniz Technical University in Trabzon.

They participated in the May Day demonstrations held at Taksim Square in Istanbul, with nearly 1,000 students gathered, and organized a press conference in Ankara with the support of the teachers' union, *Eğitim-Sen*, in order to demand free education.

- 22 Another important demonstration of *Genç-Sen* is the grand demonstration on December 4, 2010 in Istanbul at Dolmabahçe during which students protested against their exclusion from Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's official meeting with presidents of different universities to discuss the reform process in the university system. Members of the union wanted to get in to the meeting in order to give information and discuss their problems. They were faced with police violence during their protest²². After these demonstrations students from *Genç-Sen* were supported by some of the actors of the political field. The students were invited to the National Assembly in Ankara by the members and the president of the *CHP*, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. They presented to Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu their work on students' problems that they were willing to present at the conference in Dolmabahçe in Istanbul. The students also discussed with Akın Birdal from *Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, *BDP* (Party of Peace and Democracy) and expressed their claims and problems²³. The next national elections were to be held in 2011, and in the preelection context, *Genç-Sen* found a chance to make itself visible, legitimate and to get access to the actors and resources of the political field profiting from the concurrence between *BDP*, *CHP* and *AKP*.
- 23 *Genç-Sen*'s collective action repertoires have evolved and the union became more political with a more aggressive voice. The union began to emphasize "revolutionary solidarity" which can be considered as an example of the radicalization of the union's demands. The students distributed brochures and handouts in restaurants and cafeterias in universities about the conditions of workers to emphasize the importance of "solidarity between workers and students for a revolution." The death of a student named Nesih Taşkın can be considered here as a major factor contributing to mobilization (Tinbek and Yıldırım, 2011). Unable to pay the tuition fee, Taşkın, 26, had begun working on construction sites in his hometown Izmir, giving a mandatory break to his studies in order to earn enough money to pay his tuition fee the following year. On March 3, 2011, he fell from the seventh floor during construction of a building because of the lack of safety ropes tying him to the building. In response, on 8 March 2011, ten branches of *Genç-Sen* organized protests and made a press statement in Eskişehir and Muğla against tuition fees in order to emphasize "the unity of cause" of the world of workers and that of students.
- 24 Another topic that has become more visible in the union's demands during the year 2011 is the Kurdish question in Turkey. The union was already engaged with the Kurdish issue since its foundation, defending education in the mother tongue. The branches of Artvin, Çanakkale, Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara, Manisa, Eskişehir, Bursa, Denizli and Aydın organized several street demonstrations, sit-ins and made several press statements with the participation of other student groups to denounce the death of a Kurdish student named Şerzan Kurt, 21, killed during a fight between left- and right-wing students at the University of Muğla by a bullet fired by a police officer on May 11, 2010²⁴.
- 25 Moreover, the student union organized a large protest on March 16, 2011 in Ankara to commemorate the assassination of 16 March 1978²⁵ with an emphasis on "revolutionary

solidarity”. They sung revolutionary songs of the 1960s and 1970s and they used slogans in Turkish and in Kurdish such as “We will kill fascism in the blood that it had spilled”, “The rage of mothers will kill fascists”, “There is no salvation when we are alone, it is all together or no solution at all”, “The state will pay for its murders”, “Long live the solidarity of workers, long live the brotherhood of Turkish and Kurdish peoples” (a slogan of the student movement and last words of the famous youth leader of 1960s, Deniz Gezmiş, killed by the capital punishment in May 1972) (Erdoğan, 2012: 229). In addition to these mobilizations, students also commemorated the massacre of Halabja on 16 March 1988, the date on which thousands of Kurdish civilians were killed by chemical attacks by the order of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in the region inhabited mainly by Kurds. The protestors put forward the “revolutionary struggle for the independence of the Kurdish people against the imperialist states.” (Erdoğan, 2012: s. 229).

- 26 At the end of this street demonstration, the students published a press statement signed as “revolutionary, democratic, patriotic students” by announcing their aim to “try to build socialism and destroy the old and corrupted order with all its institutions”. Other left-wing youth groups also gave their support, which was not the case before. The students in *Genç-Sen* were faced with different student groups since the beginning of their foundation. On one hand, some of the socialist and communist organizations and parties were defending that creating a union to represent the students’ demands was not based on a class ideology and young people’s demands shouldn’t be separated from society’s demands. Since the main cleavage in the society was the labour-capital cleavage, building an organization based on student identity was an attack on the unity of the working class identity. On the other hand, right wing, nationalist, Islamic youth associations and organizations are the other rivals of *Genç-Sen* in universities. It is observed that the newcomers get easily convinced by these movements because of the facilities, housing and financial advantages that they offer to students. The fights between the ultra-nationalist youth groups such as the youth branch of the Nationalist Action Party, *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, who can rather be called *Ülkü Ocakları*, become violent especially in universities like Istanbul University or Ankara University.
- 27 However, student associations and youth branches of socialist and communist political parties started to sign press statements together with *Genç-Sen* and organize common demonstrations with the impact of the state repression and police violence. Hence, during the fourth congress of the *Genç-Sen* on March 19, 2011 held in Ankara with the participation of about 900 students, the union decided to adopt as its “political axis” the objective of fighting against the Council of Higher Education, the policies of the government, the capitalist market policies, the uncertainty of students’ futures, and the process of Bologna related to the adhesion of Turkey to the European Union. They have also emphasized the importance of defending “the cause of workers and martyrs of the revolution” referring to the 1960s and 1970s²⁶.
- 28 Thereupon, it can be seen that the students have started to get interested in different problems and political issues by adopting different strategies and slogans referring usually to the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, it seems essential to emphasize the effect of the traditional left-wing organizations, including *DİSK*, during the emergence of *Genç-Sen* and the formation of its collective action repertoires as well as their evolution and radicalization.

Activist identity at the intersection of the legacy of the 1960s and student youth of the post-1980 period

- 29 Demet Lüküslü defines two kinds of disinterest for politics as active and passive by pointing out that youth of post-1980s had an attitude of active disinterest (Lüküslü, 2005). The youth prefer staying out of politics on purpose as they believe that politics is corrupted (Lüküslü, 2005). On the other hand, Alpay Kabacalı, specialist in social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, explains that students' interest in politics and their eagerness to organize and express themselves on political and social issues had risen during the constitution of 1961 that provided broad rights and freedoms (Kabacalı, 2007). Furthermore, Mahmut Tezcan, after analyzing the events and the problems of students during the 1960s and 1970s, declares that student movements were organized with a political and ideological sense (Tezcan, 1991). Hence, in the analysis of *Genç-Sen*, it can be seen that the union pursues the legacy of student movements of 1960s and 1970s since the students praise political life and try to keep the legacy of the 1960s and 1970s by organizing street demonstrations and using slogans of traditional revolutionary movements and organizations such as *Dev-Genç*²⁷.
- 30 Moreover, the fact that the union is mainly founded by trade unionists at *DİSK*, who was a major actor in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, mark the identity of *Genç-Sen* as following the collective action tradition of the Confederation. *Genç-Sen* can constitute in this sense a proper case for the academic debate on how and why people mobilize. Olivier Fillieule states that the articulation of themes and the formulation of tensions are determined with constraints but no social movement can emerge without a minimum political opportunity. Moreover, he adds that the context, in which a protest movement is born, has a large influence on its chances of success (Fillieule, 1993). In addition to this, Olivier Fillieule and Cécile Péchu state that “Compared to the work of Mancur Olson, the originality of McCarthy and Zald²⁸ is to have concentrated their thoughts on the resources themselves, their modes of acquisition by organizations and their strategic use. According to them, the study of aggregation of resources (money and time) is crucial for understanding a movement; yet this aggregation process is only possible if there is a prior organization.” (Fillieule and Pechu, 1993). They give the example of the anti-abortion movement’s victory in the United States that can be explained by the assistance provided by the Catholic Church and the Protestant fundamentalists, as well as the funds and facilities offered by a wide recruitment base and a genuine conviction among public opinion (Fillieule and Pechu, 1993 : 83-85).
- 31 In this context, resource mobilization and the openness of political systems becomes important in order to understand the identity of *Genç-Sen* and the evolution of its action. While the students are sorely repressed and marginalized by the political power, the union is supported financially by *DİSK* and profits from the resources of the unions and other democratic organizations utilized against repression. Furthermore, the political participation process of students in *Genç-Sen* can be explained by using as a basis the observations of Doug McAdam during his research on “Freedom Summer” in the United States of America. He points out that participating in a high-risk activity is easier when there is a recruiting agent like a friend who facilitates the link between the participant and the organization or activity (McAdam, 1986). In this context, it can be

seen that even though the demonstrations of *Genç-Sen* are confronted with police violence or student arrests, the relationships between student members of *Genç-Sen* and non-members are often strong enough to encourage the latter to participate, overcoming the perceived threat of the police.

- 32 The radicalization of *Genç-Sen's* activities and its discourse that goes back to leftist political groups of the 1960s show us how the students had begun to situate themselves on the left of the political scale. The emphasis made on “the martyrs of the revolution”, referring to young socialist activists killed during the 1960s and the 1970s, the “class struggle against the capitalist system” and the use of street demonstrations as a part of its collective action repertory²⁹ can be considered as the main traces of this activist heritage. Since the young activists preferred making personal contact with students and going out to the streets, it could be possible to state that the union's activism is in continuity with the traditions of the 1960s and 1970s. The adoption of this heritage got clearer with the aggravation of state policies against the youth. Even though *Genç-Sen* started its activities by talking about students' daily problems, by the end of 2010, the demonstrations about other political issues and the use of references to socialist youth organizations of the 1960s and 1970s became more common. They started to publish declarations and news about the political agenda of the country such as arrests of hundreds of students, dozens of journalists, trade unionists, lawyers and professors accused of being “terrorists”, and the authoritarian internal and international politics of the AKP government³⁰. They organized a concert for solidarity with arrested students on 31 March 2012 where they have carried pictures of socialist youth leaders from the 1960s and 1970s in order to show the continuity of the cause of their struggle³¹ and made a short film to protest the arbitrary arrests of students³².
- 33 As to the relationship of *Genç-Sen* with new forms and new spaces of political engagement, we see that young activists remain suspicious about online mobilization through social networks like Facebook, Yahoo Groups and Google³³. The words of Aziz, a member of *Genç-Sen* illustrate this distrust "How can you trust someone who has said he will participate in the event the next day on Facebook? You do not know and you never know if he would be there by your side or he would escape when the police intervened"³⁴. Furthermore, another member Emre argues:
- "These are strategies to keep young people away from the political arena, away from streets by isolating them at home and ensuring that they stay there longer. They become increasingly isolated and alone and this reduces the solidarity between them. When they start thinking that online mobilization is safer and easier, they begin to prefer not to walk on the streets so they become unable to show that they are there to express their problems. And this causes the weakening of social protest and increases the obedience to the prohibitions and to the police force"³⁵.
- 34 Thereupon, according to the division of Bernard Preel, it can be said that students in *Genç-Sen* define themselves differently from the "generation of Internet" and their identity carries the traces of the "generation of May 1968" due to their attachment to social movements during this period (Preel, 2005). Putting forward the importance of street protests and refusing to get too involved in new forms of collective action, *Genç-Sen* distinguishes itself from the new Internet generation.
- 35 Ozan Gündoğdu declares in his article entitled “Crises and opportunities of the Student Movement in Turkey” that the tension between “the admiration of the pre-1980 period's student movements” and “the necessity to renew itself” mark student

movements of the post-1980 period (Gündoğdu, 2011). Consequently, this tension takes the form of the tension between “the admiration of the activism and protest culture and tradition of students during 1960s and 1970s” and “the necessity to understand the form of “student unionism” and act according to its basic engagement areas by constantly reforming itself as well”. Since the students represent a social category that changes and members get replaced by new students each year, *Genç-Sen* has evolved a lot and continues to constantly reformulate its demands, discourse and activities, being also influenced by changes in the political context (Erdoğan, 2012). On one hand, the claim to obtain the students' right to found a “sendika”, the fight against YÖK, for a free and scientific education in one's mother tongue and for better university life conditions are still cross-cutting issues in *Genç-Sen*'s mobilization. However, in the light of the findings of this fieldwork, it is possible to say that the student union, using a discourse more attached to traditional left-wing socialist values, can be considered as heirs to "old social movements" actors. This brings us back to the main analysis object and helps us give an answer as to how the union is the result of the meeting of old and new actors of the left and to what extent it is possible to say that *Genç-Sen* introduced a new way of mobilizing for the student movement in Turkey with different forms of collective action repertoires.

Conclusion

- 36 In conclusion, it is possible to observe that state policies have direct effects on mobilization forms and on the demands of social protest actors in Turkey. New alliances among the left-wing organizations in general and trade unions in particular to fight against repressive and neoliberal policies are being formed. These alliances lead to the creation of hybrid strategies, collective action repertoires and hybrid discourses that articulated traditional and new actors. While the form of the "student union" is new to students' political engagement, the evolution of *Genç-Sen* allows us to state that the union can be seen as a hybrid organization that will continue to evolve through the participation of more young activists, heirs of the 1960s and 1970s. According to Taner Timur, “The university system problem is a social class and political power issue. We cannot build a democratic, free and creative university without creating a political life based on popular classes and at their service.” (Timur, 2000).
- 37 Hence, throughout my fieldwork and observations, it can be said that the conditions of students and *Genç-Sen* stand at the intersection of different variables related to the university and trade unionist field and to the power struggles in the country. In the context of Cold War, the left-wing student movement of the 1960s and 1970s protested against The United States' policies and the Turkish State's attitude vis-à-vis socialist and communist groups. The fight against the capitalist system of the United States and Turkey's support became key points in the political identity of the students in the 2000s in *Genç-Sen*. The demands for fair tuition fees, student cafeteria prices, better accommodation, and a fair university selection system based on equality are the main themes that remain also indispensable for the students in *Genç-Sen* during the 2000s. In the context of Cold War, the left-wing student movement of the 1960s and 1970s protested against The United States' policies and the Turkish State's attitude vis-à-vis socialist and communist groups. The fight against the capitalist system of the United States and Turkey's support became important points in the political identity of the

students in the 2000s in *Genç-Sen*. The emphasis put on class struggle and the unity of the student movement and the labour movement against the workers integration and the student youth into the capitalist system with authoritarian measures remains as one of the most vital ideological reference in use throughout the 1960s and 1970s and was still considered valid during the 2000s. In this context, *DİSK* keeps its central place as the trade union confederation who puts forward the class issues and a class struggle based trade unionism, whereas for example *Türk-İş* adopts a trade unionism based on social dialogue and good relations with the governments and the state.

- 38 In this context, the reelection of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, *AKP*, on 12 June 2011 with a percentage of 49.9% for a third term³⁶, the process of Turkey's accession to European Union, the arrests of thousands of students, intellectuals, trade unionists, journalists and activists, and the closure of *Genç-Sen* by the court in 2012³⁷ are essential issues for the future. These changes leave us with the question of how *Genç-Sen* will evolve in this context and if it will become more radical and engaged. The students are faced with organizational difficulties because of the other kinds of organizations such as rightwing, Islamic and ultranationalist youth associations and groups: "There are fights that get physical and our information desks are attacked by the nationalist students who take us as terrorists. They tear off our posters and announcements on the walls of the university" says one of the members of *Genç-Sen*³⁸. In addition to this, the left-wing activists and intellectuals argue that the students union had to be founded by the students themselves so the intervention of *DİSK* constitutes a problem of autonomy for the students³⁹. Thus, the students in *Genç-Sen* are faced with many challenges. The learning process of student union activism based on a class struggle approach is still an ongoing question for the students and the legacy of the 1960s and the 1970s remain an ideological and organizational resource during this process. The formation process of the identity of *Genç-Sen* has not ended yet and the union tends to reformulate its demands and its collective action repertoires, adapting them to new kinds of challenges, constraints as well as opportunities with the evolution of the political context, and the resources of different social protest actors and organizations.

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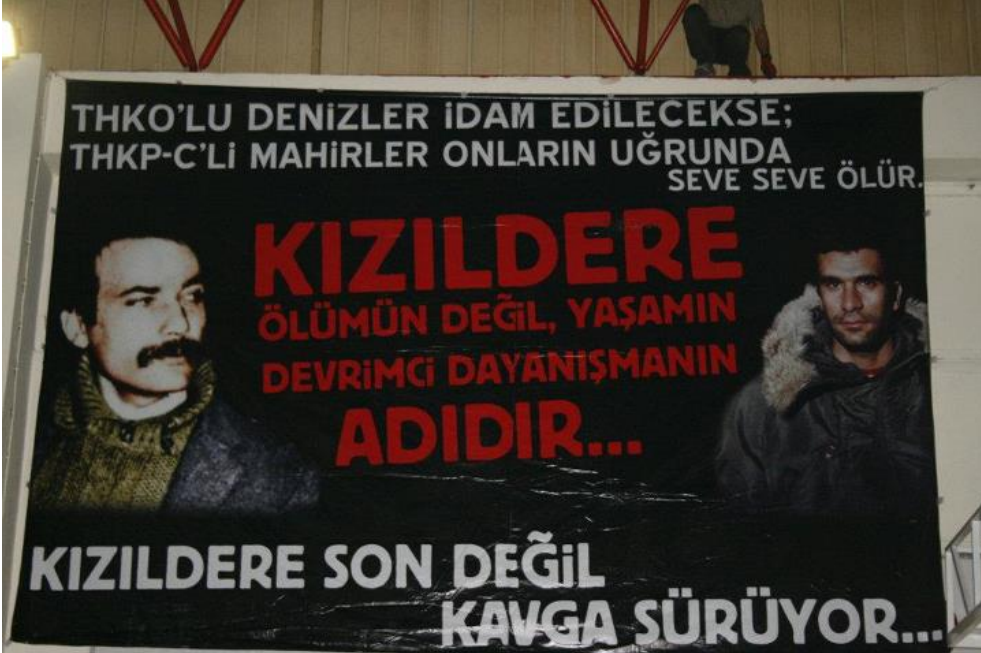
APPENDIXES

1. "Word, decision, future to youth"



Source :http://ogrenciajansi.com/index.php?option=com_datagallery&Itemid=36&func=detail&catid=180&id=1359, 16.06.2011.

2. A poster from the concert for Solidarity with Arrested Students on 31 March 2012; youth leaders of the 1960s and 1970s Mahir Çayan (on the left) and Deniz Gezmiş (on the right) seen on the picture.



Source : <http://www.etha.com.tr/Haber/2012/03/31/genclik/tutuklu-ogrenciler-icin-bulustular/>, 27.01.2013.

3. Police Violence from a street demonstration of the Union



Source : URL :http://www.posta.com.tr/turkiye/HaberGaleri/YOK_protestosuna_polis_mudahalesi.htm?ArticleID=74002&PageIndex=5, tiré le 16.06.2011.

NOTES

1. For more information on youth in the 1990s see, Lüküslü, Demet (2008), « New Youth Movements and New Political Attitudes in Turkey », *Ninth Mediterranean Research Meeting*, Florence, European University Institute, 12-15 March.

2. *DİSK* is one of the three workers' trade union confederations in Turkey, founded in 1967. It is mainly based on a socialist and social democratic ideology whereas the other two trade union confederations, *Türk-İş* (1952) and *Hak-İş* (1976), can be placed on a more centrist point on the political scale. It had close ties with political parties like *Türkiye İşçi Partisi*, TİP (Labour Party of Turkey), *Türkiye Komünist Partisi*, TKP (Communist Party of Turkey) and *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP (People's Republican Party) during the 1970s while *Türk-İş* and *Hak-İş* had bonds with *Demokrat Parti*, DP (Democratic Party) and the Islamic-Conservative parties. The activities of *DİSK* were banned and its leaders were imprisoned after the coup of September 12, 1980. It was the only trade union that was banned, remaining so until the 1990s. 261 trade unionists of *DİSK* were convicted to 5 to 15 years of imprisonment in 1986 and 28 of its unions were closed (Tokol, 1991: 109). The confederation was reestablished in 1991 and found itself in a reconstruction period. For a more detailed analysis of trade unions in Turkey see, *Türkiye Sendikacılık Ansiklopedisi*, İstanbul, Turkey, Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları.

3. To give an approximate number of unionized students, the number of branches can be multiplied with the number of students in each branch. According to the statistics announced by ÖSYM, *Öğrenci Seçme ve Yerleştirme Merkezi*, Student Selection and Enrolment Center in 2013, there are 177 universities in Turkey. There are 3.148.860 undergraduate students, 218.630 graduate students and 60.311 PhD students (turkpdristanbul.com, 2013). During my fieldwork, I observed that the university branches of *Genç-Sen* has approximately ten to twenty students. However, given the unionization rate among workers in Turkey, which is 8.8 %, one cannot expect a high unionization rate among students neither. Despite the relative high participation

to youth organizations and associations in universities like ODTÜ or Istanbul University, the participation to Genç-Sen remains weak.

4. In order to understand the identity of the students, I asked to my interviewees questions about their families and home cities. Throughout my research, I realized that they were coming from middle or lower-middle class families, most of them civil servants or individual tradesman. Most of them were engaged politically during their youth or are still members or sympathizers of a political party or movement. Thus, in my graduate dissertation, I explained political affiliations, backgrounds and trajectories of the students and used my findings about their family and class affiliations in order to show that the reasons behind their political engagement were related with their social background and their socialization during their high school and higher education. However, in this article, I insisted on the impact of their socialization processes and political trajectories of the students more than the impact of their family backgrounds in order to demonstrate the role of the social networks by which the relations and the affiliations to the union were constructed.

5. For more information on rupture and continuities in social movements in Turkey see, Coşkun, Mustafa Kemal, « Süreklilik Ve Kopuş Teorileri Bağlamında Türkiye’de Eski Ve Yeni Toplumsal Hareketler », *Ankara Üniversitesi Sbf Dergisi*, 61-1.

6. “Disk 11. Genel Kurul Kararları” (2000), <http://www.disk.org.tr/default.asp?page=contentid=125,02.05.2011>.

7. “CPE : l'UNEF compte 40 facs mobilisées” (09.03.2006), *TF1 News*, <http://lci.tf1.fr/france/2006-03/cpe-unef-compte-facs-mobilisees-4856860.html>, 25.11.2012.

8. It can be useful to note here that despite this international dimension of the founding process of Genç-Sen, in this article the national and the historical background will be examined in a more detailed way because of the lack of more findings and a proper research on the international networks, transnational mobilizations and the transmission and the adaptation of international experiences to different national contexts.

9. Interview, Man, Activist during the 1960s and 1970s student movements, Istanbul, 24.02.2011.

10. Interview, Man, 31 years old, Born in Edirne, Graduated from the Department of Fine Arts at Bilgi University in Istanbul, Activist and former member of a political party. Father: Civil Servant, Mother: Teacher, 15.02.2011.

11. Barışarock is an alternative rock music festival organized to protest the annual rock music festival RocknCola sponsored by Coca Cola. “Barışarock: Karşı Festival’de 6. Yıl” (13.08.2008), <http://arsiv.ntvmsnbc.com/news/454953.asp>, 16.11.2012.

12. Interview, Man, Activist during the 1960s and 1970s student movements, Istanbul, 24.02.2011.

13. “Türkiye’nin İlk Öğrenci Sendikası Kuruldu” (2007), <http://www.dunyabulteni.net/index.php?atype=haberarchive&articleid=29689>, 16.09.2012).

14. “Genç-Sen Tüzük” (14.10.2009), <http://gencsenbalikesir.blogspot.fr/2009/10/tuzuk.html>, 16.11.2012.

15. Disk, *Genç-Sen’e Kapatma Davası Açıldı*, <http://www.disk.org.tr/default.asp?Page=Content&ContentId=553>, consulted on 26.11.2012.

16. “Neler Yaptık?”, http://www.gencsen.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=22&Itemid=50, 23.11.2011.

17. “La Charte de Grenoble” (1946), <http://unef.fr/2011/06/09/la-charte-de-grenoble/>, 13.12.2013.

18. Interview, Man, 22 years old, Born in Bingöl, Student in the department of political science and international relations in University of Yıldız Teknik in Istanbul, Member of a socialist political party since 2007, Mother: Housewife, Father: tradesman, 24.02.2011.

19. Interview, Man, 21 years old, Born in Antalya, Student in the Department of International Relations of Istanbul University. Activist since high school and member of a political party, Father: Self-employed, Mother: Retired, Istanbul, 03.03.2011.

20. Interview, Man, 27 years old, Student in the Department of Law at Istanbul University, Activist and member of a political party, Father: Commerce, Mother: Housewife, Istanbul, 07.03.2011.
21. Even if the left wing political axis is hard to define in Turkey, since there are many different fractions in the left, I can note that when I talk about a left wing political axis in *Genç-Sen*, it includes pro-Kurdish activism, socialist in a sense different than European socialists where it means rather social democrats than socialists or marxists-leninists as is the case in Turkey.
22. “Kongreyi Protesto Eden Öğrencilere Polis Saldırdı” (27.05.2011), <http://bianet.org/bianet/ifade-ozgurlugu/130298-kongreyi-protesto-eden-ogrencilere-polis-saldirdi>, consulted on 15.03.2011.
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39. It might be added here that during my fieldwork, I noticed more of an administrative autonomy from the union, except some financial and material help for the organization of the demonstrations, rather than a dependence on the directors and decisions of *DİSK*. *DİSK* ceased to be a part of the decision-making process of the student union by avoiding imposing demands or claims on *Genç-Sen*. However, it is not possible to state that *DİSK* is out of the picture in the

organization and mobilization of the students. It is the legal department of *DİSK* who follows *Genç-Sen*'s trial in court and the address of the headquarters of *DİSK* in Istanbul is still shown as the address of the headquarters of *Genç-Sen*. Nevertheless, I should note that since my fieldwork was constructed mainly on the student union and its evolution, *DİSK*'s recent attitude and the extent of engagement with *Genç-Sen*'s activities remain a question to be answered in a future research project.

ABSTRACTS

The acceleration of neoliberal policies in the mid-1980s led to a rise in social inequality and unemployment during the 2000s in Turkey. Students, influenced by both state repression and the aggravation of economic conditions, became major actors in social movements. The Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions, *Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu (DİSK)*, which had been in a period of reconstruction since its reestablishment in 1991, had triggered the foundation of a student union. In 2007, *Öğrenci Gençlik Sendikası (Genç-Sen)*, the first students' union, in Turkey, was founded. This article, based on observations and interviews conducted in February and March 2011, examines the emergence and the structure of *Genç-Sen* and the evolution of its discourse and mobilization strategies. I argue that the organization was strongly affected by the legacy of 1960s and 1970s and by the tradition of labour unionism.

INDEX

Keywords: Turkey, Mobilization, Social Networks, Collective Action Strategies, Trade Unionism, Youth Movements, Student Unions.

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