

Diaspora Erdoganism Among Turkish Post-Migrant Workers in Germany: A Case Study of Two Regional Events in the Metal Sector in 2018

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Abstract

During the 2018 work council (Betriebsrat) elections, the possible impact of the rise of the extreme right on trade union movement attracted a great deal of attention in the media and in academic circles in Germany. Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) were not able to break through the long-lasting dominance of social democrats in work councils and unions. Reflecting on that I have focused on the growing hegemony of Erdoğan and his party among diaspora workers with reference to workplaces and union movements. I have chosen two significant case studies in 2018, each with its own dimensions and ramifications, to understand the issue. The first case was the Sevim Dağdelen- IG Metall-Salzgitter-Peine incident, and the other was the election of many migrant workers, including Turks, in Stuttgart Untertürkheim from the lists of AfD supporters' association, called Zentrum Automobile (from now on Zentrum) in the Betriebsrat elections. Many non-German right-winger groups, diaspora Erdoganists mainly have met with Zentrum members due to the discomfort they feel about the recent refugee flow to Germany. It seems some German Turks' support shifted from Social Democrats to extreme-right. Besides revealing itself as distancing from the ballot box and SPD at the electoral level, diaspora Erdoganism expresses itself within various decision making processes in workplaces and the union branches. One case in point is a mutual distancing that occurred between pro-Erdogan Turks and IGMetall secretariats, traditionally dominated by staff affiliated with the SPD. Like the case of Sevim Dağdelen, in many incidents, they also acted as a lobbying group for preventing critics to Erdogan and his regime.

Keywords: *Workplaces; Union politics; political alignment; extreme right; Turks in Germany; IG Metall*

Introduction

During the 2018 work council (*Betriebsrat*) elections, the possible impact of the rise of the extreme right on trade union movement attracted a great deal of attention in the media and in academic circles in Germany. The year before, the right-wing Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) had reached a historic zenith, winning 12,6 percent of the vote in the September 2017 Federal Elections; according to exit polls, blue-collar workers were the second largest social segment (after the lower middle classes) to vote for the party. Although AfD-linked candidate lists tried to capitalize on this electoral success during the *Betriebsrat* elections, they were less able to break through the long-lasting dominance of social democrats in work councils and unions.

The popularity of right populism during these *Betriebsrat* elections brought a new research question to mind: Are there any parallels between this right-wing pressure and the long-standing popularity of a particular kind of authoritarian populism, epitomized by R. Tayyip

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Erdoğan (Diaspora Erdoğanism), among certain members of Turkish community living in Germany, mainly composed of workers (according to 2018 population census)?

I have previously studied the “internal and external” (better understood as “multi-national”), historical and conjunctural causes and results (as visible/empirical reflections and deep currents) of the rise of Erdoğanism in this community since 2015-16. While their scales and origins are different, it is to be expected that their interconnections exist between the rise of these two right-populisms. They were potentially fed by a similar socio-political German habitus framed around the social ambiguities after 2009 World Economic Crisis and the migration wave sparked by the war in Syria (since 2012). When reports emerged about their collaboration in Stuttgart-Untertürkheim, this subject became increasingly interesting for me. What were the main dynamics of this cooperation, and was this collaboration a local or a widespread phenomenon?

During my initial research, I came across a multi-dimensional reality that extended beyond the local electoral collaboration in Daimler Untertürkheim work council elections. Indeed, the growing hegemony of Erdoğan and his party in this community has had many consequences for local workplaces and union movements. Thus, instead of focusing on the periodical interventions of the *Betriebsrat* and trade union elections, it is more useful to consider the topic from a wider perspective that reflects the various kinds of practices engaged in by workers from this community. Were there any other symptoms of Erdoğan's growing hegemony in the workplaces and trade unions?

In this sense, while evaluating the right populist mobilization (around the figure of Erdoğan) among the post-migrant Turkish community — which has long been divided on ethno-cultural lines, including Sunni, Alevi, Turkish, Kurdish — on working life and the unions, it is necessary to take into account changes in the political atmosphere inside the unions themselves — historically tied to the Social Democratic Party (SPD) — in response to the strengthening of extreme right populism within the working class overall.

To what extent did the factors such as the living conditions and social relations of the Turkish post-migrant community in Germany play a role in this rise? How did the right-wing shift in the political atmosphere of German society and its labouring classes influence that community? How have strong, long-standing nationalist tendencies and the ethno-cultural polarization among many of those Turkish workers been affected by Erdoğan's right-wing populist rhetoric (which has evidently increased between 2013 and 2018)? How and to what extent have Erdoğan's discourse and the activities of the German branches of his Party (Justice and Development Party, abbreviated in Turkish as AKP)² -- through trans-territorial state facilities and institutions such as Turkish consulates, DITIB mosques³ (affiliated with the Turkish state but organized under German association laws), the Yunus Emre Institute,⁴

² The AKP's Germany branch was opened by Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan and German chancellor Gerhard Schröder in a famous Turkish neighbourhood of Köln, Mülheim, in 2004. Established as the Union of European Turkish Democrats (UETD), it changed its name in 2018 to the Union of International Democrats (UID) after it was deemed incompatible with the free and democratic order of Germany by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution.

³ DITIB is a Turkish abbreviation of “Union of Turk-Islam Religious Affairs” which encompasses 960 mosque associations in Germany.

⁴ The Yunus Emre Institute is a Turkish version of Goethe Institute. The Institute was founded in 2009 by the Erdoğan government and numbers 58 cultural centres abroad.



and the YTB,⁵ -- influenced this political tendency? Did the political mobilization and socialization experienced by pro-Erdoğan workers push them toward a more organized, more informed and more interventionist stance toward German politics and trade unions than before? If yes, what kind of repercussions does this have on relationships in the workplace in general and specifically in work-council elections and union processes?

Turkish politics and politicians seem to have become more prominent in the political mobilizations of this community -- a phenomenon that holds the key to our first two questions specific to Germany. In other words, it is important here to start with the socio-economic and cultural problems faced by post-migrants of Turkish origin and to consider the projections of the right-wing shift among workers in Germany (in their daily lives, in the work place and in their trade unions).

Social Reality of Turkish Post-Migrants in Germany

According to the 2019 population census, people of Turkish origin -- defined here as people with family roots in Turkey -- are still the largest group of immigrants in Germany, numbering 2,8 million individuals, which equals 13,3 percent of all post-migrants in Germany (Datenreport, 2021: 33). When we look closer at the data and the comparisons in the 2021 *Datenreport*,⁶ it becomes clear that this group is not very happy, feels insecure, and lives under difficult conditions -- both in daily social life and in the work place.

Overall, people with an immigrant background were more likely to be unemployed than those without (12% compared to 6%). This is particularly true for migrants from Turkey in 2018, 14% of whom were unemployed. In terms of occupational status, individuals with an immigrant background were comparatively more likely to be employed as unskilled or semi-skilled workers than those without an immigrant background (20% compared to 10%) (Datenreport, 2021: 289). This was particularly true for individuals from Turkey (29%). This segment also holds a below average number of jobs that require medium (15%) and higher education (5%), compared to both non-immigrant Germans (30% and 18 % in order) and other immigrant communities (24% and 9%) (Datenreport, 2021: 290). While people without an immigrant background have an average net equivalent monthly household income in 2018 of 1 800 euros, this figure was only 1,500 euros for people with an immigrant background (Datenreport, 2021: 291). In particular, persons of Turkish (1,330 euros) and Eastern European origin (1,270 euros) had below-average net equivalent household incomes. In parallel to those income levels, Turkish and Eastern European communities in 2018 had a poverty risk rate of 32% and 33%, making them particularly affected by a higher risk of poverty among the groups of origin considered here. Only refugees were worse off on all those indicators (Datenreport, 2021: 292). The Datenreport (2021, 290-291) also demonstrates that the conditions for women of Turkish origin are the worst among all immigrant groups, except for refugee women, in terms of profession, income level and poverty risk.

⁵ The YTB is a Turkish abbreviation for the "Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities." The YTB was established on 6 April 2010 by the Erdoğan government to coordinate the activities of Turks living abroad, related (sister) communities and the Turkey Scholarship Program, and to develop services and activities for these groups.

⁶Datenreport 2021 (2021): Ein Sozialbericht für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland, prepared by the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung/bpb, in cooperation with the Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis), Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB) & Bundesinstitut für Bevölkerungsforschung (BiB). Bonn: Reihe Zeitbilder.

According to the 2021 Datenreport, people with a Turkish immigrant background most frequently stated that they had experienced situations in which they felt they were disadvantaged (14%) because of their origin (appearance, name, etc.), while only 2% of people from south-western Europe or 2% of (late) repatriates said the same. Nearly half of the former group (46 %) was very worried about the rise of xenophobia in Germany. Both indicators reflect those Turkish post-migrants feel themselves worse off and more insecure than refugees to Germany do (Datenreport, 2021: 292). Concerns about their economic situation were most widespread among the group we discussed and those from the successor states of the former Yugoslavia. Around one in five people was very worried. When it comes to the composition of one's circle of friends, one third of those with an immigrant background stated that most of their friends also had a migrant heritage (36%). However, Turkish post-migrants most frequently stated (58%) that their circle of friends consisted largely of people with an immigrant background. All these indicators push this group to the last row in terms of their intention to stay in Germany forever, with only 71 percent intending to do so (Datenreport, 2021: 292). It is obvious that, the more difficult social situation of this group and their more widespread subjective experience of discrimination could explain this result.

Beyond this impression of a *cul-de-sac*, a recent survey about changes to the social lives of Turkish post-migrants, living in North-Rhein Westphalia (942 000 people) between 2009-2019 shows that some improvements have been made in the realm of language acquisition, social and cultural interactions and friendships with non-migrant Germans (Sauer, 2020).⁷ The first notable finding is that, despite the fact that the average age is slowly increasing and the average number of children is decreasing somewhat, the proportion of those who identify as religious has increased dramatically in the last 20 years. While 57% of all respondents defined themselves as somewhat or very religious in 2000, that number jumped to 81% in 2019 (Sauer, 2020: 13).

Since 2000, despite continuing educational deficits in comparison to the total population, there has been a remarkable advancement in educational levels among the second and later generations of this group (Sauer, 2020: 16-18). In line with this, the proportion of those who rate their understanding of German as “very good” or “good” has increased from 52% in 2000 to 68% in 2019. However, there was no such increase in the use of German among friends. There are some other indicators that demonstrate that the frequency of intercultural contact has not improved since 2001. In some respects, there have even been some fluctuations in the opposite direction. For example, while 37% of respondents in 2001 frequently spent their leisure time with locals (implies Germans), 18% sometimes (at least once a month) and 45% rarely in 2001, by 2019, these numbers shifted to 32% who spend their leisure time frequently with locals, 23% who do so sometimes and 45% who do so rarely (Sauer, 2020: 28). The proportion of those who frequently spend their free time with locals was highest in 2010 at 40%. Another indicator showing a decrease in interactions was the

⁷ The survey was a bilingual, representative survey of around 1,000 people of Turkish origin aged 18 and over in North Rhine-Westphalia conducted by telephone. This multi-topic survey of immigrants of Turkish origin has been conducted by the Center for Turkish Studies and Integration Research (ZFIT) in cooperation with the Ministry for Children, Family, Refugees and Integration (MKFFI) of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia for the past twenty years. Sauer, Martina (2020): *20 Jahre Mehrthemenbefragung: Integration und Partizipation türkeistämmiger Zugewandelter in Nordrhein-Westfalen 1999 bis 2019* (20 Years of Multi-Topic Survey: The integration and participation of immigrants of Turkish origin in North Rhine-Westphalia from 1999 to 2019). Essen: Zentrum für Türkeistudien und Integrationsforschung (ZFIT). Accessible at: https://cdn.website-editor.net/09fe2713f5da44ff9ead273b339f17d/files/uploaded/111720_ZFIT20_Bericht-Mehrthemenbefragung_web.pdf (last visited 21.05.2021).



proportion of those who reported visits by and with locals at home (Sauer, 2020: 28).⁸ As a result, we cannot pinpoint an improvement; indeed, there has been a slight regression in the social interaction with Germans, especially since 2011. In 2019, 45% of those surveyed mainly use their native language in their friend circles, 35% partly used their native language and partly spoke German, and 20% predominantly spoke German (Sauer, 2020: 19-20).

Political Tendencies of Turkish Post-Migrants: Right-Wing Vote for Turkey, but a Vote for SPD in Germany

People from the 1st and 2nd generation who came to Germany from Turkey either through labour immigration or in connection with those labour flows (through family reunification, etc.) have been engaged in Turkish politics since the 1970s. The majority support right-wing parties that emphasize Islamism and far-right nationalism. One of the main drivers for this is that a significant portion of those who came to Germany through labour migration were of Central Anatolian origin, where nationalist-conservative parties are traditionally strong.

A field study, conducted by Emre Eren Korkmaz in 2015-2016 in Ruhr Region, investigated representations of workers with a Turkish migration background in the trade unions. It revealed that this politically fragmented totality nonetheless has many internal similarities (Korkmaz, 2018). Korkmaz states (2018: 993) that the field research shows that the members of this community converge on a number of fundamental issues related to Germany, that supersede existing ethno-cultural and political polarizations. In other words, although workers with a Turkish immigration background are independent from each other, probably unaware of each other (Korkmaz, 2018: 993), they exhibit similar living standards and problems and share an understanding of the public sphere offered at their workplaces, views and expectations towards German bureaucratic institutions, trade unions and their own associations -- despite their polarization at the political-discursive level (Korkmaz, 2018: 1007-1008).

When we consider all these indicators together, the living conditions of this internally divided community and the precariousness of their relations with larger German society becomes more understandable. What is notable is that a significant proportion of Turkish Sunnis, who themselves suffer from discrimination in Germany, show a greater amount of support than those living in homeland do for the chauvinist politicians in Turkey who advocate for ethnic-cultural exclusionary policies against minorities (Kurds, Alevites, Romans, etc.). This recalls Benedict Anderson's "nationalism from distance," which defines the situation in which diaspora communities support ultra-nationalist, or fundamentalist religious movements in their home country (Anderson, 1992: 11-12).

Having described the general framework of this community's socio-political habitus in Germany, I would like to touch upon their participation in German politics and their party preferences. At the end of this section, I will focus on the reasons for the strong support for Erdoğan, including the role played by various political actors, especially Erdoğan's organizational branches in Europe, and the implications of the figure of Erdoğan himself for these supporters.

⁸ In 2019, in the 12 months before the survey, 48% had visited locals at home, 54% had visits from locals. In 2011, these numbers were 50% and 55% respectively.

Of the 2.8 million people of Turkish origin living in Germany, only 720 000 adults have German citizenship and thus the right to vote during the 2017 German general elections; in comparison, the number of Turkish citizens in Germany who could vote during the 2018 Turkish general elections was almost twice as high (1 445 000 adults). According to surveys, the interest of Turkish voters in the German elections was 71,5 % in 2013, dropping to 64 % in 2017 elections. This is obviously higher than their participation in the Turkish elections (45,7 % in 2018).⁹

The relationship between the first two generations and the German parties (mostly SPD) and the trade unions have been under construction since the 1980s. The first two MPs from this community were elected in 1994. After the establishment of the SPD-Green coalition government (1999), those relationships improved sharply. In succeeding elections until 2017, between 80-90 % of those with a Turkish migration background voted for leftist parties (mainly the SPD, then the Greens and PDS-*Die Linke*). During the 2017 election campaign, Erdoğan called for a boycott of the SPD, the CDU and the Greens, who had been most critical of him in the past, a period in which Erdoğan's authoritarian populist discourse was at its zenith. Beyond the decline in turnout (71,5 % to 64 %), Erdoğan's boycott demands mostly hit the SPD, which had long been the preferred party among Turkish-origin voters. Led by Martin Schulz, who had criticized Erdoğan's authoritarian populist rhetoric, the SPD's vote share fell from 64 percent in 2013 to 35 percent in 2017. *Die Linke*, which has close ties to HDP circles, increased its votes to 16 percent. In these elections, the CDU was the most successful in capturing the SPD's lost votes, increasing their share from 7% to 20%, while votes of Greens increased by 1% to 13% (Goeres, Spies and Mayer, 2018: 6).¹⁰

Although two-thirds of the workers are deprived of the right to vote and to be elected in Germany, there is no legal obstacle stopping Turkish workers from enjoying these rights in *Betriebsrat* and union elections. Similarly, to the position of women and those from other post-migrant communities, it should be noted that there are invisible obstacles and barriers (related to the factors such as language, educational levels, social and political networks, institutional and socio-cultural habitus/tendencies, etc.) to being elected to higher positions in the trade unions. The critique that a disproportionate representation of "white, German men" in the higher ranks of the unions has gained ground in recent years. Despite these realities, more members of the second generation of workers of Turkish origin have been elected to *Betriebsräte* and elevated to the upper bodies of the trade unions.

Never Ending "Integration Problem" and Rising Erdoğanism in Germany

The right-wing CDU/CSU bloc emerged as Germany's leading party in the 2005 General Elections. Its active opposition to the new citizenship law proposed by the previous SPD-Greens coalition government that directly addressed workers with an immigrant background people became a significant part of its election campaign. Instead of engaging with that citizenship law, the CDU pivoted to a discussion of the inadequate integration due to poor language skills and educational levels of those workers (mainly referring to "Turks"). Before

⁹ For election statistics please see the following links: <https://www.sabah.com.tr/secim/24-haziran-2018-secim-sonuclari/almanya-secim-sonuclari> (last visited 16.04.2021); <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/dunya/2017/08/18/almanyadaki-turkiyeliler-son-secimde-hangi-partiye-ne-kadar-oy-verdi> (last visited 16.04.2021); <https://perspektif.eu/2018/03/08/turkiye-kokenliler-son-secimde-kime-oy-verdi/> (last visited 16.04.2021).

¹⁰ Goeres, Achim; Spies, Dennis C.; Mayer, Sabrina J. (2018): Deutsche mit Migrationshintergrund bei der Bundestagswahl 2017: Erste Auswertungen der Immigrant German Election Study zu Deutschtürken und Russlanddeutschen, <https://www.uni-due.de/migrantenwahlstudie/> (last visited 05.05.2021).



the election, the CDU had gone to the streets and collected millions of signatures against that law, which would have made it easier for long-time post-migrants in Germany to become German citizens. Conversely, Germany has been recognized as a country of immigration; prime minister Angela Merkel declared “Doner Kebab” as one of the national foods of Germany, and the Ministry of Immigration and Integration has held by the SPD since 2005. Besides the SPD’s strong position in Angela Merkel’s coalition government, there has been a relative improvement in the socio-economic conditions of the second generation of Turkish origin in terms of German language, education level, socio-cultural familiarity with German society and social networks, and the higher development rates of the German economy. In addition, Germany and the EU’s relationship to Erdoğan’s government in Turkey also warmed in those years.

One month before the December 2005 General Elections in Germany, German Prime Minister Gerhard Schröder and his Turkish counterpart Tayyip Erdoğan attended the opening ceremony of the Union of European Turkish Democrats (UETD) Centre in Cologne-Mülheim. The UETD is an informal coordination centre for Erdoğan’s party in Europe¹¹ and is thus – in addition to other newly founded trans-territorial state institutions, such as the Yunus Emre Institute and the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) -- an extension of homeland politics within this community.

In our interview, the journalist E. T. stated that the organization of the AKP in Germany dates back about 10 years: “Acting on *Diyânet* (DITIB) mosques and cadres, the AKP has made a leap forward by creating a division in the very strong Islamist “National Vision” tradition of the past. They now come together through the UETD.” However, when looking at the website and official publications, there is no information given, other than the names and e-mail addresses of the so-called regional heads who operate the 15 regional presidencies in Germany – except for the UID centre in Cologne-Mülheim.¹² Journalists and experts state that the visible part of this organization is the tip of the iceberg. On the contrary, it operates a strong grassroots movement spread through the DITIB mosque associations and official institutions such as Consulates, YTB, and the Yunus Emre Institute, etc. Similarly, the *AKP Abroad Election Coordination Centre* is an informal structure that does not have a legal personality and only operates on a Facebook page with 61000 followers. During a visit to the UID’s headquarters in Cologne, it was clear that the office was not used very actively, and it appeared to be rented as a private classroom that offers courses to prepare for the university entrance exam in Turkey.

Another factor that has strengthened the pro-Erdoğan attitude among Turks living in Germany, according to journalist Elmas Topçu, is their right, since 2014, to vote in the Turkish elections. Furthermore, by after two prominent people in the German organization were elected as MPs for Istanbul in the June 2018 elections, Erdoğan has become, in the eyes of his supporters, a leader who grants “Turkish citizens” abroad not only the right to vote, but also the right to be elected.

¹¹ Although people speak about an organisation called the AKP Abroad Election Coordination Centre, which also operates in Cologne, it does not have a transparent institutional structure and is understood to be an unofficial social media branch of the UETD (renamed UID in 2018).

¹² For further information about the non-transparent 15 regional presidencies as the backbone of the organisational structure of the UID please see: <https://u-id.org/de/bolge-ve-subeler/> (last visited: 19.05.2021).

As a result, the pro-Erdoğan attitude prevalent among this community living in Germany is fed both by political developments and conflicts in Turkey and by the situations and political attitudes they encounter in Germany. To put it more clearly: With the rise of anti-immigrant political movements and attitudes in Germany, especially among the ranks of the working class, alongside Erdoğan's high-pitched nationalist-Islamist rhetoric', a double-sided process of "right populism from distance" has developed since the 2010s. This process is further reproduced and supported by the perception of ethnic discrimination stemming from double standards and existing inequalities, which are often caused by their class position in society, and the feeling of oppression/victimization it creates. Therefore, as members of this community move away from their traditional support of centre-left parties in response to Erdoğanism, they mostly do not turn towards centre-right parties such as the CDU or the FDP. In this sense, it can be said that the population in question has become alienated from the institutional politics of Germany.

The Latent Power of the Right Wing Populism among the German Working Class and its Effect on Workplaces and Unions

"Right wing populism" was the most popular concept used to describe the lumpen-authoritarian right political line that arose between 2014 and 2020, reaching its peak with the election of President Donald Trump. These right wing populists portray themselves as representatives of uncorrupted popular movements in contrast with the corrupt establishment, which they define as the nexus of economic globalism and political liberalism. Their supporters can largely be found among the working classes and petty bourgeoisie, who were further impoverished by the world economic crisis of 2008-2009 and continue to be worried about their future. This was exhibited in the rise of xenophobic, patriarchal, chauvinist and nationalist-religious attitudes which are reflected in the electoral success of parties such as the AfD in the 2017 German General Election (where it went from 4,7% to 12,6% of the vote share).

The defiance shown by pro-AfD workers by declaring separate candidate lists during the last works council elections (*Betriebsrat* elections in 2018) attracted some public interest: It is relatively easy to find news report (Götz, 2018; Kipper, 2018) or academic articles on this theme (Dörre, etc. 2018; Dörre, 2019; Sauer and Detje, 2019; Kronauer, 2019). Far-right organizations such as Zentrum Automobile or AVA (Alternative Association of Workers in NRW), who tried to capitalize on the success of the AfD in the 2017 general elections to create a breakthrough for themselves in 2018 *Betriebsrat* elections, mostly failed. Although its direct influence on the *Betriebsrat* elections was weak, this undercurrent remains within the German working class in many areas, expressing itself in the high rate of votes for the AfD in recent general and local elections. Recent studies show that there is an above average interest among workers and union members in the xenophobic nationalist politics of parties and groups such as the AfD and Pegida¹³. For example, according to the results of exit polls conducted during the 2017 election, the AfD reached 19% among workers, which was 12.6% of their overall total. This rate has been measured as 15 percent among unionized workers.¹⁴ Recent public opinion polls reveal that this trend upwards has continued, with the AfD rising

¹³ Pegida is the acronym of "Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes" [Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West].

¹⁴ DGB (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund) (2017): Bundestagswahl 2017. So haben GewerkschafterInnen gewählt. <http://www.dgb.de/++co++1aca2e9e-a209-11e7-99c0-525400e5a74a>. (last accessed: 21.02. 2021).



to the second strongest party, with 22%, right after the SPD, which fell to 24%, among blue-collar workers.¹⁵ Likewise, Pegida, an active street movement, describes itself as “the alliance of the middle classes and the working class” in its statements.¹⁶

Diaspora Erdoganism as a Right Populism from a Distance

The transformation of the AKP / Erdoğan’s rule from moderate Islamist democrat to an Islamist nationalist authoritarian rule in Turkey must be understood as part of a global right populist trend that followed the 2008-2009 world economic crisis. One of the developments that emerged from this crisis was the aforementioned populism, which also found a growing audience among individuals of Turkish origin in Germany. This section will focus on the consequences of the parallel formation of an Islamist and Turkist authoritarian right-wing bloc around the figure of Erdoğan in Germany and the AfD’s rise to third-largest party in German politics. This right populism is intimately intertwined to the spiritual-social relations that this community has established with Turkey (and not with Germany), as well as the close relationship with the material and moral satisfaction derived from Erdoğan “as the charismatic leader of Turkish state” in recent years.

One way that Erdoğan-supporting union members resemble AfD supporting German is their move away from the SPD, which has the strongest historical and organic ties to union movement. The trapezoidal political attitude popularized with the formula “to the left (e.g. to the SPD) in Germany and to the right in Turkey” has been invalidated in the last 5-10 years as Erdoğan’s call to “boycott the CDU, SPD and the Greens,” took hold during the 2017 German general elections. Erdoğan’s transformation of the tensions between Turkey and Germany between 2015 and 2018 into a successful propaganda tool alienated the workers in question from the SPD and from German politics in general. One consequence of this situation is the establishment of new parties (the Bündnis für Innovation and Gerechtigkeit, BIG Partei, and the Allianz Deutscher Demokraten, AD-Demokraten) that address the immigrant population, a phenomenon also seen in Belgium and the Netherlands.

While relations with the German state had previously been strained by harsh statements from on both sides from time to time, the nationalist parties – from the FDP to the AfD – and the tabloid newspapers, such as Bild, continued to scratch the old Turkish-hostility wound that had emerged in the 2000s, with the question of “Which state are Turks really loyal to?” The large nationalist-conservative segment of Turkish community living in Germany responded by gathering around Erdoğan and reacting negatively when described as German-Turkish or of Turkish origin, wanting instead to be referred to as Turkish-Muslim. As in the case of Mesut Özil, one of the stars of the German national football team,¹⁷ Erdoğan took advantage of this loyalty test by the German right, responding “they are loyal to me, of course” and using it for his right-populist propaganda. Indeed, in 2017, there was an asymmetrical clash of civilizations (in territorial sense) that poisoned the political atmosphere of both countries in

¹⁵ The AfD was the most popular party in state elections with 44% of workers in Brandenburg, 39% of active workers in Thuringia and 30 per cent of workers in in Baden-Württemberg (cited by Klaus Dörre in an interview with Hans Monath, *Tagesspiegel*, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/arbeiter-und-die-radikale-rechte-die-afd-macht-die-unsichtbaren-sichtbar/26687036.html>, last accessed: 05.12.2020).

¹⁶ Pegida (2015). Programm. Dresdner Thesen. www.pegida.de/programm.html (Last accessed: 13.03. 2021).

¹⁷ Before 2017 Constitutional Referendum, Özil and two other footballers of Turkish origin who play in the English Premier League, visited Erdoğan during this his visit to Britain and kissed his hands. The photographs of this event sparked widespread debates about the loyalty of the Turkish community origin in Germany. In response, Özil lost his position on the German national team.

favour of the nationalist populists, contributing to Erdoğan's constitutional referendum in April and the victory of the AfD and the FDP in the September general elections.

Erdoğan's widespread expansion of his political apparatus in Western Europe from Austria to Belgium, but especially in Germany has taken on formal-informal, visible-invisible dimensions. Beyond presenting itself as a shelter to protect Turks abroad, this apparatus has also provided a political education to tradesmen, women and young people with a wide range of practical activities such as election campaigns, rallies, charity events and courses/seminars. The community has thus been mobilised through an interlocking of political subjects that can easily explain their troubles and demands in German. Like their leader, the cadres of this political machine in Germany have gained the ability to develop a victim narrative alongside a proud, and sometimes angry discourse about the heated political tensions between Germany and Turkey. In this sense, we are faced with a more united and organized Turkist-Islamist bloc that speaks better German than in the past.

Their lexicon consists of various phrases familiar to recent populist politics that express both how aggrieved and angry and how proud of their country and its leader people are: "there is racism and Islamophobia in Germany;" "there is a discrimination against Turks and Muslims;" "Erdoğan has raised Turkey to a level competitive with Europe in many respects;" "even Germany is jealous of Turkey when it sees our gorgeous airports and bridges;" "those who prevent our President from holding a rally in Germany are no different from the Nazis." It is bears repeating that the reasons for this victimization are not wrong: This is a community that has been subject to systematic discrimination and verbal and physical racist attacks/harassment for 60 years in Germany. It is understandable (if not wholly accurate) that some with strong nationalist-conservative feelings truly believe in the propaganda of Erdoğan as a leader who defies Europe and are thus deeply proud of him.

So far, we have called the political stance of Erdogan supporters in Germany "right populism from a distance 'a la Turca'". However, at the point where this whole debate has come, I thought that the calling this political attitude as right populism remains too general, and that a new naming is needed that would more clearly reveal the characteristics of it. I think, Wilhelm Heitmeyer (2018)'s term "authoritarian nationalist radicalism" to describe the attitude of those who support AfD, Pegida also fits this group of Erdoğan supporters in some nuances. The more appropriate naming for them could be "authoritarian nationalist-conservative radicalism from a distance". It is seen that this section, which glorifies the concentration of all powers in the hands of an oppressive chief, naturalizes nationalism as if it is a necessity of love for the homeland country. Conservatism, which is characterized by loyalty to the authorities, forms the ideological leaven of this authoritarian nationalist attitude. We can consider that they put forward this attitude with the angry language of a victim-oppressed but proud-standing-unyielding subject, the threats they hurl at the opponents, and their ganging up from time to time, as an indicator of their radicalism. Instead of this rather long name ("authoritarian nationalist-conservative radicalism from a distance"), I will prefer to use my short and convenient conceptualization as "Diaspora Erdoganism" to mean the same thing.

Diaspora Erdoganism has naturally also gained ground among workers, who remain an important component of the post-migrant Turkish population. As a matter of fact, during my interviews, interviewees stated that the aforementioned group reflected these right-populist arguments, frequently expressing anger at their victimization while being proud of their



homeland (Turkey) and its leader (Erdogan) in workplaces and during Betriebsrat elections or other union processes.

Expressions of the Rise of Diaspora Erdoganism

Although the questioned majority had demonstrated their nationalist or Islamist conservative attitudes among the diaspora, they were mainly a silent supporter milieu of social democrats in German politics and unions. Their social class and ethnic-religious position also told them being closer to social democrats for living better and more secure conditions in workplaces and streets of Germany. Therefore, they needed warm relations with social democrats (SPD). These parameters had functioned until 2010s. It has been observed that the parameters determining the close relations of these social milieu with the social democrats at the political and trade union level have changed due to factors such as the deterioration of Turkey-EU relations, then the tendency of the government to build an authoritarian regime in Turkey, the heterogeneity of the social-class composition of the diaspora in favour of small entrepreneurship and temporary jobs with neoliberal employment policies, and the refugee problem after the Syrian civil war.

The right populist tendency within Turkish diaspora express themselves first on the electoral level. On the one hand, the spectrum of the parties they voted for expanded towards the German right-wing parties¹⁸. Beside the distancing from SPD demonstrated in details at the page 8 (above), another important political tendency that has emerged among Turkish post-migrants is the boycott of German elections on the grounds of Erdogan's call during the 2017 Bundestag elections process that no party is Turkey-friendly¹⁹.

The political attitude change, which we discussed more broadly in the previous sections, reveals itself not only at the level of elections, but also within various decision-making processes and in the unions. A senior trade unionist with a Turkish migration background, N.P. from Cologne, explains the differences of the attitudes of conservative-nationalist majority of Turkish diaspora from those of the past:

These people have not been right-wing for the last 10 years. Nationalism and religious conservatism were always strong among Turkish workers. Although nationalist segments of Turkish diaspora did not like the cooperation between the unions and people who were opposed to the political regime, which was quite oppressive from time to time in Turkey, and thus, motivated by human rights and workers' rights, supported the Turkish opposition, they were not as involved as today. Their voices were not that loud.

After confirming that the Turkish right-wingers appear more organised and speak louder than before, the Bosch worker M.H. explained during the conversation with him in Ulm that "They used to hide themselves a bit in the workplaces, in the unions. They were shy, not showing

¹⁸ It can be said that the fact that the right did not form an exclusionary discourse against them as much as before in the post-Merkel period may also have an effect on this. It is also observed that this rightward orientation extends to the support of the AfD among the less educated-skilled casual workers of the working class, and even reaches more complex far-right positions in the case of vegan food tycoon Attila Hildmann's who is one of the most well-known figures of the protest movement organized on the basis of conspiracy theories against the Corona measures in Germany.

¹⁹ As a newly formed party based on Diaspora Erdoganism in 2016, the AD Democrats sought to challenge their electoral success with Erdogan's boycott call.

their true feelings. For 3-5 years now at Bosch, they have been more openly expressing their support for Erdogan". He continued as follows:

In the enterprises where they are present in large numbers, they wield their power at middle levels, such as the *Vertrauensmann*²⁰ position, rather than in the *Betriebsrat* elections. They have a good network at the level of supervisors and crew chiefs. What strengthens these networks is the authority and opportunities that these mid-level positions offer. For example, it provides the opportunity to choose between working in different shifts. Last Sunday was a holiday, for example, the foremen decide to whom the holiday bonuses will be distributed. Or whether the leave will be uninterrupted or intermittent, that is, in 2 slices of 2 weeks or 4 weeks, is also decided by the chefs. In all such matters, depending on whether or not they are part of the network, some are protected and others are excluded. That's why people don't want to confront the members of this network. When there is a discussion (*about Turkey, Erdogan*)²¹, they silence even the most advanced (*meaning left-wingers*). Through the strength of these networks, they block both progressive people (*of Turkish origin*) and the union. Thus, it is in the interest of the bosses to strengthen them in this way.

Taking the light of my field research, I have reached the conclusion that it is not very feasible to describe, analyse and depict every single incident of the past years in order to measure the impacts of pro-Erdoganism on workplaces and trade unions. I suppose that the assessment of two significant case studies in 2018, each with its own dimensions and ramifications, is sufficient to understand the issue we are dealing with. Indeed, the first half of 2018 was a moment when relations between Germany and Turkey seemed to have become increasingly tense for reasons such as Erdogan's interference in the German Bundestag election campaign in autumn 2017, the blocking of Erdogan's attempts to take his June 2018 election campaign to European countries, the launching of a military operation by Turkey to capture the Syrian Kurdish city of Afrin. One of the two exemplary cases I mentioned was the Sevim Dağdelen-IG Metall-Salzgitter-Peine incident, and the other was the election of many migrant workers, including Turks, in Stuttgart Untertürkheim from the lists of AfD supporters' association, called *Zentrum Automobile* (from now on *Zentrum*) in the Betriebsrat elections.

Sevim Dağdelen Case and Afterwards

Salzgitter-Peine branch of IG Metall Union launched a meeting with deputy chairwoman of the Left Party parliamentary group in the Bundestag Sevim Dağdelen on 23 January 2018. As can be seen from the following sentences in the leaflet of the event, she is a staunch critic of Erdogan: "(...) The influence of the Turkish president and his AKP government has long reached into Germany, where they spy on and persecute dissidents and opposition figures." She has written the book "The Erdogan Case: How Merkel Sells Us to an Autocrat".

Most recently, she criticized the Turkish military offensive against the northern Syrian region of Afrin which took part between January and March 2018. Dağdelen had incurred the anger of many German-Turkish Erdogan supporters after she held up a flag of the Syrian Kurdish

²⁰ *Vertrauensmann* means a trusted person who is chosen by the workers. He is the first person a worker turns to when he has a problem or wants to clarify a question. They act as an intermediary between the worker and *Betriebsrat* members (the union) and the employer.

²¹ Words in parenthesis were added by me (A. E. D.)



militia YPG in the Bundestag at the beginning days of Turkish offensive to Afrin. Since then, Dağdelen has been under police protection because of numerous death threats.

While the hot agenda regarding the Afrin attack continued, Erdogan's supporters also reacted to the IG-Metall Salzgitter Branch hosting such an event where Dağdelen will be the speaker. The “Allianz Deutscher Demokraten” (Alliance of German Democrats, acronym AD-Demokraten), a small German party close to the party of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, called on German-Turk members of IG Metall to quit the union in an open letter²². Several German Turks have provided sample letters for an exit, and there are dozens of photos of exit declarations on social networks (esp. Facebook). According to information from t-online.de, the phone at the local IG Metall office did not stand still. Insulting calls were also received there²³. IG Metall Salzgitter-Paine did not cancel the event and Dağdelen came to the event with bodyguards and made her speech²⁴, even though it led to many resignations and attempts to resign from the union. As the *Braunschweiger Zeitung* (Erik Westermann) reported on April 18, the IG Metall board members Jörg Hofmann, Christiane Benner and Jürgen Kernen have massively criticized the local administration of IG Metall in Salzgitter because of this event in an internal letter²⁵.

In the meantime Ramazan Akbaş, the current leader of AD-Demokraten, who described himself as a “Verbal Destroyer” on Facebook, was making fun of Dağdelen’s personal bodyguard due to death threats, and was making posts such as “I just got a zero-point threat”²⁶. AD-Demokraten, which caused so much controversy and resignation in the IG Metall, was founded in 2016 by the entrepreneur Remzi Aru, after the Federal Assembly's decision on the Turkish genocide against Armenians²⁷.

At the beginning her acronym was ADD but, the AfD filed a lawsuit against the originally used acronym ADD in 2017 and won the legal dispute. For this reason, the Party changed its acronym to AD-Demokraten. In his view, there was no longer any party for - especially Turkish - migrants in Germany to be elected. Considering the way, it came to Germany's public agenda before the Dağdelen incident (with its propaganda in the 2017 Federal Assembly elections with Erdogan’s photographs and Turkish slogans²⁸), AD-Demokraten can be seen as the embodiment of diaspora Erdoganism because the party, where the President of Turkey implicitly urged voters of Turkish origin to vote for AD-Demokraten in the 2017 federal elections, received 30,000 votes in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). Nationwide that amount equals 0.15 percent of the votes, in NRW 0.4%. In some isolated cities, such as in

²² For more info please see: Schmitz, Hannah (2018) Erdogan-Anhänger ziehen gegen IG-Metall-Salzgitter zu Felde, <https://www.braunschweiger-zeitung.de/politik/inland/article213222577/Erdogan-Anhaenger-rufen-zu-IG-Metall-Austritt-auf.html>, 25.01.2018.

²³ For more info please see: Wienand, Lars (2018) “Erdogan-Unterstützer rufen zu IG-Metall-Austritt auf”, https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/innenpolitik/id_83109288/erdogan-unterstuetzer-rufen-zu-ig-metall-austritt-auf-.html, 25.01.2018.

²⁴ Christoph Koopmann (2018) „Linken Politikerin Sevim Dagdelen, Erdogan Kritik mit Bodyguards“ (Left politician Sevim Dağdelen, Erdogan criticism with bodyguards), *Braunschweiger Zeitung*, <https://www.braunschweiger-zeitung.de/niedersachsen/article213205471/Linken-Politikerin-Sevim-Dagdelen-Erdogan-Kritik-mit-Bodyguards.html>, 23.01.2018.

²⁵ Erik Westermann (2018), “IG Metall Vorstand Schickt Brandbrief Wegen Türkei Vortrag”(IG Metall Executive Board Sends Brand Letter Regarding Turkey Lecture), *Braunschweiger Zeitung*, <https://www.braunschweiger-zeitung.de/salzgitter/article214053577/IG-Metall-Vorstand-schickt-Brandbrief-wegen-Tuerkei-Vortrag.html>, 18.04.2018.

²⁶ Wienand, Lars, *ibid*.

²⁷ https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allianz_Deutscher_Demokraten, Last visit 24.12.2021.

²⁸ Der Spiegel (2017) “Kleinpartei wirbt in NRW mit Erdogan-Plakaten” (Small Party Advertises in North Rhine-Westphalia with Erdogan Posters), <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/bundestagswahl-2017-kleinpartei-wirbt-in-nrw-mit-recep-tayyip-erdogan-a-1166884.html>, 08.09.2017.

Harne, the party became the strongest party among those parties that did not reach the Bundestag with 1.2%²⁹. Just like the AKP's European branch UID, AD-Demokraten is not a transparent organization: Its website (ad-demokraten.de) is not reachable, and the fact that her only active accounts on the internet, her outdated Facebook and Instagram accounts.

The Dağdelen incident, which became a hot topic of discussion with the resignation call of AD-Demokraten (from IG Metall), resonated in many workplaces and union branches. It was an event that troubled the secretariats of IG Metall, not only in Salzgitter, Lower Saxony or the nearby states, but also in the distant states. For example, participants in the focus group meeting in Stuttgart and IG Metall secretaries interviewed stated that the Dağdelen incident brought up the collective reactions and threats of resignation of some workers of Turkish origin in their regions. IG Metall secretaries also stated that during the aforementioned days of 2018, these individuals came to union halls in groups and made adversarial speeches such as: “How can the trade union federation invite this terrorist supporter to speak? If you do not give a satisfactory response to this, we will resign from the union.”

During the interviews I was told that there was another episode at Daimler-Untertürkheim where Erdogan supporters came to the union halls with threats of resignation. In the union bulletin published by the Untertürkheim branch of IG Metall, Erdogan supporters reacted again when there was a short interview with journalist Can Dündar who had to immigrate from Turkey in 2016. “That’s why 50 people will resign from the union,” they said. The union secretaries were hardly able to convince them in this case as well.

In addition, it became clear in the interviews that Erdogan supporters in unions from other sectors also used the resignation card as a method of collective initiative/protest to put pressure on the union secretariats when an event concerning Turkey that could criticise Erdogan or his authoritarian regime came to the fore.

During my research, I learned that this is not a singular incident, there are other cases. One of them was quoted by an exiled Turkish academic. Short after Sevim Dagdeviren, Salzgitter event, this case occurred in another city of Lower Saxony in 2018. In this case, the umbrella organization of the German unions, DGB (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund-Union of German Trade Unions), agreed to hold a panel discussion on 1st May, or 1 September, the World Day of Peace with a former trade unionist who had to immigrate to that city from Turkey after 2016. The panel, with the topic “Pressure against the Dissidents in Turkey” would be held with two exiled speakers from Turkey. One of them was that former unionist and the other was a (academic) visiting fellow of Osnabrück University. However, the panel was cancelled shortly after the programme was announced. The reason given was: “We have many trade union members of Turkish origin. Most of them are supporters of Tayyip Erdogan, more than that, they are far-right nationalists”. Trade unionists who said that we cannot afford their possible reactions and resignations if we hold this panel further commented: “Even if we take the risk and hold the panel, we are afraid that these angry workers will storm the meeting”. The trade unionist who had to immigrate from Turkey, who was invited to the panel, also confirmed this event.

At this point I would like to report on a private meeting that took place with the initiative of some GEW trade union secretaries of Turkish origin in the DGB House in Cologne. The topic of this meeting, in which we participated together with another academic as

²⁹ https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allianz_Demokraten, Last visit 24.12.2021.



representatives of the association, Academics for Peace-Germany, founded by academics who emigrated from Turkey, was: “What can the German trade unions do to show solidarity with the trade unionists, educators and academics who are suffering under the pressure of the authoritarian regime in Turkey”. GEW members, exiled trade unionists from Turkey and we talked for a while, gave out information and outlined our expectations. DGB officials who took the floor later, after mentioning the Sevim Dağdelen incident, the reactions to it, resignations and the actions such as collecting signatures and said: “We understand you very well, but we cannot hold press conferences, statements, organize panels-seminars, or aid campaigns on this agenda that might arouse the reaction of our Turkish origin union members, majority of whom are Erdoğan supporters.” I remember that the meeting ended inconclusively after a short while.

Another incidence I came across during the research interviews took place in Stuttgart-Böblingen. It is reported to have happened before a seminar on “Human Rights” organised by the Stuttgart-Böblingen branch of the Verdi trade union in 2018. This event was held as part of the union's activities to mark 10 December, Human Rights Day. The theme of the speech and the fact that the speaker was one of the union secretaries of Verdi Stuttgart and close to the lefty association of Turkish post-migrants, DİDF (Turkish abbreviation of the Federation of Democratic Workers Associations), disturbed Erdoğan supporters. Although this group tried to deter the union from holding this event with threats of resignation, Verdi held this meeting with a determined stance.

These instances, which we were able to access based on the random interviews we conducted, show that many similar events took place in 2018 and 2019. In many cases, it can be seen that the right-wing populist Erdoğan supporters achieved the desired results through the widespread pressure they exerted on the trade unions in the Dağdelen case. Due to the influence of this pressure, the German trade unions after a while rejected the requests of the democratic opposition circles of Turkish post-migrants, such as to react to the repressive developments in Turkey, to show their solidarity with the threatened trade unionists. The similarity of those events is striking with the political pressure created by the strengthening of far-right groups among unionized workers in East Germany in the union processes in Dörre's mentioned article³⁰. Erdoğan supporters in the West of Germany apply the similar pressure/protest methods (such as collection of signatures, collective resignation from the union and making protests) as the extreme right or sympathizer workers in the East against the union secretariats, when the union's anti-AfD and Pegida activities come to the fore.

The Case of the 2018 Daimler Untertürkheim Betriebsrat Elections and Its Influence

The last Betriebsrat elections across Germany were held in early 2018. The candidacy of workers from many diaspora communities, including Turks, from the *Zentrum* lists, which is known in the region as the workers' association of neo-fascists, in the Betriebsrat elections at Stuttgart Daimler Untertürkheim, one of the important centers of the automotive industry, on March 1, had become one of the sensational issues in the German press.

Union researcher Prof. Dr. Klaus Dörre from Jena University stated that right-wing lists are common in large-scale enterprises, which are the strongholds of the unions, especially in the

³⁰ Please see; Dörre, K., Bose, S., Lütten, J. *et al.*, *ibid.*

automotive industry. Dörre has argued that “in Untertürkheim and other factories, there is also a multinational and multicultural workforce, where right-wingers from the former Yugoslavia encounter Erdoğan supporters and try to conclude agreements with German right-wing alliances.”³¹ Interviews in the newspaper *express* with members of workers councils underline this: Individuals with Turkish, Serbian, Croatian or Greek roots were among the 187 candidates on the list of extreme-rightist *Zentrum* in Daimler Untertürkheim (*express*, 2018: 6).³²

In addition to the long-standing resonance among these extreme rightists, which Dörre points out, the other factors behind the fact that Turks, who have long been the object of hatred of racism and xenophobia in Germany, act together with a neo-Nazi workers’ association (*Zentrum*) against IG Metall should also be presented satisfactorily. The recent pro-Erdoğan political mobilization or general reactions among workers against the union praxis of IG Metall, or personal interests also should be discussed. Before explaining these factors, it is worth asking the question: “What really happened at Daimler Untertürkheim?”

The most prominent attraction of *Zentrum* during the 2018 Betriebsrat elections was this alliance with post-migrant workers in Untertürkheim. The YouTube videos broadcasted by “*Zentrum Automobil*”³³ caused waves in the German media and became a major issue within Daimler, as the *Zentrum* meetings in Untertürkheim and Mettingen have shown. In response to public debates sparked by the video, Betriebsrat members in Untertürkheim held a meeting on February 20, which no one from *Zentrum* and those on the list attended, and issued a joint declaration.³⁴

Three days after the Untertürkheim Betriebsrat’s declaration, an article by Adnan Korkmaz published in the Daimler workers bulletin *Alternative*³⁵ demonstrates how much noise the issue had caused. Korkmaz, who is of Turkish origin, begins his article by citing a statement made by the leader of the Sachsen-Anhalt AfD, André Poggenburg a week earlier (February 14): “An AfD politician insulted fellow citizens of Turkish origin as “camel drivers”³⁶ and that they had no business in Germany. According to him, we should go back to our mud huts on the Bosphorus.” He ends the piece with the following:

And now, Turks or other people with a migration background are being hounded again at AfD events with the participation of *Zentrum* candidates. It will be interesting to see what else will come to light there. I expect a reaction from the Turkish colleagues who are candidates on the *Zentrum* list: Get off the list! We don’t let

³¹ Dörre described, *Zentrum Automobil*; “as an organization that is solidly anchored in the militant, far-right neo-Nazi scene through Blood & Honor”. Blood & Honor is a far-right international network that was banned in Germany in 2000.

³² One interviewee (André Kaufmann) said that, “Hilburger and his followers are said to have searched specifically for people with nationalistic or patriotic views, as we were told” (*express*, 2018: 6).

³³ *Zentrum Automobil*'s videos are available on Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNJVCfwogBg&ab_channel=ZentrumAutomobilZentrumAutomobil
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kylYs6l2ZOk&ab_channel=ZentrumAutomobilZentrumAutomobil

³⁴ Labournet.de (2018): Declaration by the Betriebsrat of the Untertürkheim plant and car development: www.labournet.de/politik/gw/gw-in-d/igm/zentrum-automobil-e-v-cine-neofaschistische-betriebsgruppe-bei-daimler-stuttgart/ (accessed: 20.2.2018)

³⁵ Korkmaz, Kemal (2018): “So langsam bröckelt die rechte Fassade von Zentrum und AfD” [The rightwing facade of the Zentrum and the AfD is slowly crumbling], *Alternative, Für die Kolleginnen und Kollegen im Daimler-Werk Untertürkheim*, 164: 2.

³⁶ For Poggenburg's statement and the reactions it caused, see the following two news reports in the German press: <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/afd-politiker-beschimpft-tuerken-in-deutschland-als-kameltreiber-15448890.html>; <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-turks-plan-to-sue-over-afd-politicians-camel-drivers-rant/a-42608271>



ourselves be insulted as camel drivers. That list is not an option for Turkish colleagues.

As Korkmaz points out, a paradoxical situation has developed here: proponents of an ideology based on demarcation and national superiority seem to be politically aligned in their rejection of a multi-cultural post-migrant society, regardless of ethnic origins – or at least united in their rejection.

At Daimler Untertürkheim, approximately 19 thousand people voted for 41 *Betriebsrat* members to be selected from 6 competing lists. IG Metall, whose list includes 243 candidates, won 33 seats and emerged as the largest group in these elections, while 6 people were selected from the *Zentrum* Automobile list with 187 names on its list. As confirmed in the interviews I made: Although 40 percent of those on the *Zentrum* list were of Turkish (15 names), Croatian, Greek, Serbian, or Arabic (2 names) origin, all of the elected were German. On the other hand, IG Metall officials stated that half of those selected from their list have a migration background.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that many people of Turkish origin took part in *Zentrum*'s image correction video, named “Wir sind Zentrum” in 2019, where they implicitly explain that *Zentrum* is not an association of neo-Nazis and includes many of workers with an immigrant background. In an interview, E. T., a *Vertrauensmann* in Daimler Untertürkheim, stated :

The 13.2 percent that *Zentrum* reached in 2018 is not a low rate at all. It would be a great success if they increase this in the next *Betriebsrat* elections in 2022 and show that they have broken the decades-long hegemony of IG Metall in Germany. I can't prove it, but a lot of workers believe and talk about the AfD's extra support and funding as key to *Zentrum*'s success. This is a workplace with 19 000 people, and it is normal to have 30-40 out of the hundreds of Turks and Croats working here who agree to be in their showcase for money or seats. The most important thing that *Zentrum* offers to non-German workers here is intra-group moral solidarity-help and the potential to sway IG Metall. There is a serious reaction among workers to IG Metall. Although *Zentrum* does nothing to protect workers' rights in the workplace, it still gathers supporters because it criticizes IG Metall. Besides, *Zentrum* is effective because IG Metall's trade unionists, including *Betriebsrat* members of Turkish origin, engage more with socialist union activists and workers.

As a matter of fact, a year later, in May 2019, the developments experienced with the Whatsapp correspondence in which two *Zentrum* member Nazis systematically threatened a Turkish origin *Vertrauensmann* with two highly disturbing anti-Muslim caricatures/images. When the incident came to light, Daimler fired both *Zentrum* members. In July 2019, *Zentrum* released a video claiming the innocence of them³⁷. On top of that, when a news report including anti-Muslim images in the WhatsApp posts that led to the expulsion of these two

³⁷ For the video please visit the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGi1tsuco-4&ab_channel=ZentrumAutomobil In the description of the video, *Zentrum* explained how these two dismissed members were victimized as follows: “Two severely disabled workers are dismissed because an IGMetall-Vertrauensmann takes revenge for the alleged exposure of his black market trade. Instead of protecting the colleagues, their own union takes a shot at them and stabbed them in the back. The accusation: "right-wingers". This case shows the everyday corruption within the mainstream unions and what consequences the political agenda has for each individual colleague. Today it hit Timo and Joachim, tomorrow it could hit every other colleague.”

people was broadcast on the *MeinZ Report*³⁸, even the local officials of the AfD had to declare that *Zentrum* was not one of them. Interviews in Stuttgart and the surrounding area also indicated that even if this affinity which surfaced during the 2018 elections has slightly lessened due to *Vertrauensmann* incident in 2019, it is still persisting. And it manifests itself in its opposition to IG Metall. As a matter of fact, while the tendency among workers from the Turkish diaspora to act together with *Zentrum* has decreased somewhat, as a stronger tendency, resignations from IG Metall have increased in recent years.

Having summarised the response to our previous question: “What really happened at Daimler Untertürkheim?”, we may proceed to answer the following question: “What do the findings from my fieldwork in Stuttgart and Ulm actually tell us about the case?”

According to the information I received during the fieldwork, the *Zentrum*'s List candidacy incident did not occur in the way it was depicted in the German press. The interviews revealed that some workers in the Turkish diaspora who are not socio-culturally Erdoganists, such as Alevis or secular Kemalists, also stood on or voted for the *Zentrum*'s list. Reasons given include the fact that some Turks act out of selfish and careerist motives, the desire to benefit from the *Zentrum*'s horizontal monitoring networks and the cheaper membership fee, which is %75 lower than that of IG Metall. Although diaspora Erdoganists seem to be emerging in the forefront of this trend, it can be assumed that this is due to their majority position in the community to which they belong and their overt Turkish nationalist attitudes.

Despite in the Turkish diaspora, it is primarily non-Erdoganist, social democratic/secular workers who are elected via the IG Metall list at Daimler Untertürkheim, it can be noted that Erdogan supporters are among the elected trade union lists and works councils. One point underlined in the interviews we conducted in Stuttgart is that the collaboration of far-right groups from Balkan countries and Russian-Germans with the German right is significantly stronger than Turkish right-wing workers.

Hence, the assertion that those of Turkish origin working with or acting jointly with *Zentrum* are Erdogan supporters has not been confirmed in the outcome of our field research. Nevertheless, there is a necessity to contemplate the grounds on which some workers from the Turkish diaspora have such a tendency towards the *Zentrum*. It is understood that the *Zentrum* has managed to turn the wind of the AfD's rise in the 2017 Bundestag elections in its favour against the Union establishment in the 2018 Betriebsrat elections. According to the ballot box results, the rate of those who voted for the AfD in the Stuttgart 2 region, which includes Untertürkheim, was 15 per cent, while the *Zentrum* list achieved 13.2 per cent in Daimler Untertürkheim. Likewise, the socialist party *Die Linke*, which received only 1 per cent less votes than the AfD in the same region, did not consider putting up an alternative list³⁹ against the social democratic-dominated IG Metall and ensured that *Zentrum* remained unrivalled in terms of garnering the reactions around itself with the distrust against the current line of the union⁴⁰. However, they have experienced that digitised automation in car production has led to the number of workers at Daimler Untertürkheim dropping from 22 thousand to 19 thousand between 2014-18, and they are aware that more is on the agenda.

³⁸ A program broadcast on the *Das Erste* (The First) channel in Germany.

³⁹ This is an indication that the anti-Fascist alarmism predominant in *Die Linke* is actually working in favor of the social democrats.

⁴⁰ As far as I understood from the in-depth interviews during the field work, the various tones of the left are absorbed into IG Metall, and the groups that are too radical to be absorbed are shown the door of the union. Those who are caught in this situation remain silent for fear of being excluded from union work and jeopardising their job security, and present their critique from the radical left in the form of "advice against the fascist threat".



Therefore, there is a general discomfort about IG Metall having a distrustful, conciliatory and bureaucratic stance for workers, especially when it comes to job security.

Obviously, *Zentrum* put itself forward as a strong group expressing the workers' dissatisfaction with unionism practiced by IG Metall, the workers council members as well as the trade union secretariat, and the workers of Turkish origin were also influenced by that propaganda. An example of how *Zentrum* deals with workers who have problems with the union is exemplary, as told by Z. Z., a union activist at Daimler Hedelfingen, whom I interviewed in Stuttgart:

Towards the end of 2019, the dismissal of temporary workers came up on the agenda at Daimler Hedelfingen. Against this we carried out a petition which was signed by 700 workers. With these signatures we went to the office of the IG Metall-Betriebsrat member to fax them to the union headquarters. As soon as this person heard our request, he expelled us from his room, saying "Please leave this office". Just after this incident, the people of *Zentrum* at the factory came to us and said, "You are right in your demands, we want to be with you and help you". We replied them, "We are anti-fascists, we will never have anything to do with you."⁴¹

Concerning the earnestness of the *Zentrum*'s repeated criticism with similarly simple phrases (IGMetall is corrupt, lazy and collusive, incompetent to protect the threatened employment securities of the workers), I would like to quote a few sentences from an interview with Michael Clauss, a senior Betriebsrat member, published in *Junge Welt* to give an idea of *Zentrum*'s stance, discourse and practices during Betriebsrat meetings at Daimler Untertürkheim.⁴² Clauss said that:

Although *Zentrum*'s speaker Oliver Hillburger always accused everyone at IG Metall of corruption, he stayed silent during the fifty hours of negotiations with management and voted against contracts that put temporary workers into normal employment. Clauss states that Hilburger and his team did not fight for workers but kept saying: "I don't have a majority on the works council. In future, I'll perform completely differently."

Coming from a tradition of social democratic trade unionism, it is quite logical that IGMetall secretariats are more likely to associate with social democrat/left-wing post-migrant workers. Conversely, this situation stemming from the union's habitus may have triggered a perception of injustice among the many post-migrant workers who have been politically biased towards nationalism from a distance. Possibly, this may have generated a tension dynamic that operates in favour of *Zentrum* among the aforementioned workers. When combining such a sentiment with the callousness and detachment between Diaspora Erdoğanists and SPD members on the general political arena and the mutual distrust created by the reactions of the Turkish right to the incidents of Sevim Dağdelen and Can Dündar in the same period, *Zentrum*'s gaining a foothold among workers from the Turkish diaspora seems to be more comprehensible. At this very point, regarding the membership of non-Germans to the *Zentrum*, I would like to

⁴¹ A. L., one of the secretaries of IGMetall, whom I narrated this incident to during my semi-structured interview, explained that the opposite had recently happened in Rastatt: "In October 2021, a plant in Rastatt intended to lay off 400 hired workers. When IGMetall took a combatant stance there, the dismissals were thwarted and many of those workers were taken on as permanent employees. 60 kilometres away, *Zentrum* staff in Untertürkheim, still continue to propagate that "IGMetall is not doing anything for you".

⁴² Clauss, Michael (2018): "Die Konfrontation suchen die nicht", Interview by Johannes Supe, *Junge Welt*, February 20, 2018, <https://www.jungewelt.de/loginFailed.php?ref=/artikel/327700.die-konfrontation-suchen-die-nicht.html>.

convey the argument that a number of presuppositions about today's German politics, which can be considered specific to the right populist habitus, play a unifying role, pointed out by IGMetall secretary A. L.:

It is necessary to see that the discourses of Zentrum also appeal to the right-wing of Croatian, Serbian, Russian and Turkish. Namely; we see that the themes expressed by Zentrum members; such as the criticism of IGMetall for its welcoming and embracing approach to refugees, the reactionary to another lefty the advocacies, like the ban on Diesel vehicles in a certain period, the speed limit on the highway, and the discomfort from the policies that destroy the patriarchal family structure or gender roles are also the attitudes adopted by non-German rightists. It is thought-provoking to see that non-Germans are now collaborating with the AfD and Zentrum, just as the Poles acted with the Nazis in the 1930s under the impetus of similar rhetoric...

It seems that what brought people from many right-wing groups, which engage in identity politics by denouncing and complaining about each other many times in daily life, was mainly a general leftist enmity, and in particular, opposition to the social democrat IG Metall. This situation also appears to be a result of the fact that Turkish nationalist-conservatives a kind of broke off their long lasting positive relations with social democracy in Germany in the last 10 years, in parallel fashion with Erdogan's authoritarianism in Turkey, as well as his calling for a boycott against the SPD during 2017 Bundestag Elections.

Another issue raised in the interviews is that while the tendency of workers of Turkish origin to join *Zentrum* has declined following the *Vertrauensmann* incident in 2019, resignations from the union have steadily gone up in recent months. Despite all this, the majority of Turkish post-migrants, pro-Erdogan workers included, are IG Metall members or cooperate with it. When it comes to a wide-scale action, or campaign by the Union, one cannot say that diaspora Erdoganists lag behind others from Turkey in terms of active participation. Another point raised in the interviews is that the diaspora Erdoganists, whether they are members of IGMetall or not, appear to be a rather a broader group acting in a more collective manner than the others. For example, the trade union activists who attended our focus group meeting in Untertürkheim noted that this group showed remarkably high attendance at the Stuttgart leg of the IG Metall demonstrations about ongoing collective bargaining process, held throughout Germany on Friday 29 October 2021.

Consequently, the case of the Turkish post-migrants cooperating with the *Zentrum* at Daimler Untertürkheim was viewed as only limited cooperation with the workplaces in Untertürkheim district and its surroundings, where the Zentrum has been strong since 2014. It was assumed that among the Turks who acted together with the Zentrum were also persons from secular, Kemalist, Alevite circles who are not socio-politically close to the diaspora Erdoganists.

To explain this situation, I think it is necessary to return to a determination in Emre Eren Korkmaz's fieldwork that we referred to in the first chapter. Despite their polarization about Turkish politics and Erdoğan, their views and expectations towards German bureaucratic institutions, work places and trade unions (Korkmaz, 2018: 1007-1008). In other words, their socio-economic situation in Germany and their cultural and ideological leanings seem to bring several of the Turkish origins in Untertürkheim, whether they are Erdogan supporters or not, to endorse the Zentrum, which seems to be a stark opposition to IGMetall. Within this



framework, one should also consider the parallelism of the general anxieties and discontent among workers with the critical discourses of the German right populists towards unionism performance of IGMetall.

Even though *Zentrum* could not disrupt the order established by the IGMetall at the level of *Betriebsräte* and union branches, they establish networks by using their positions as intermediate managers and chiefs in workshops they are numerically stronger at, just like the *Zentrum* members. Moreover, thanks to these networks, they are getting their voices heard more, both to other workers in the plants and to the union staff and silencing dissenting voices and criticism of Erdogan and Turkey. Even when it comes to union action concerning wages and job security, their participation as a group standing together in visible numbers makes them the most important interlocutor for Turkish workers.

Conclusion

Political alignment with extreme right among diaspora workers in unions in Germany warrants further studies. AfD-linked candidate lists tried to capitalize on the party's electoral success during the Betriebsrat elections, but they were unable to break the dominance of social democrats in work councils and unions. Nevertheless, I have observed some alignment between this right-wing political party and the diaspora supporters of R. Tayyip Erdoğan, majority of the Turkish diaspora in Germany, in unions and workplaces.

One of the current debates in relevant literature of 1990s and 2000s depicted as “long-distance nationalism” is diaspora Erdoganism. It emerged within the Turkish diaspora of Germany and the rest of western Europe in the last ten years. Erdogan's style of challenging the German government, also plays a role in his being seen as a source of pride among his supporters. The fact that even the younger generations, who, unlike their first and partly second generation parents, do not have an agenda to return to Turkey, are as engaged in diaspora Erdoganism as their elders, is an indication that they also need such psychological self-valorisation through the devaluation of others via Erdogan's discourses.

While their scales and origins are different, it is to be expected that their interconnections exist between the rise of these two right-populisms. They were potentially fed by a similar socio-political German habitus framed around the social ambiguities after 2009 World Economic Crisis and the migration wave sparked by the war in Syria (since 2012). We see that as many non-German right-winger groups, diaspora Erdoganists mainly have met with *Zentrum* members due to the discomfort they feel about the recent refugee flow to Germany.

Diaspora Erdoganists, i.e. Turkish right wing populists, have emerged as a highly clamped pressure group in Germany since 2016. As a significant component of Turkish diaspora, workers have been mobilised by this kind of authoritarian nationalist-conservative radicalism. Trade unions are practical and efficient channel of participation for workers in socio-political life also open to non-German citizens. Whilst distancing from the ballot box and SPD at the electoral level, diaspora Erdoganism expresses itself within various decision making processes in workplaces and the union branches. One case in point is a mutual distancing that occurred between pro-Erdogan Turks and IGMetall secretariats, traditionally dominated by staff affiliated with the SPD.

Unionists I interviewed explained that the nationalist-conservative forces, which have been a long-time majority amongst Turkish workers in Germany, displayed a timid and cautious

appearance in the union sphere, followed by a visible change in the recent years. Along with the development and strengthening of diaspora Erdoganism, this segment clearly demonstrates its authoritarian right-wing stance with vociferous and sometimes furious language at the union level, similar to Erdogan's angry political rhetoric combining victimisation and defiance (by filtering the grievances of Turkish diaspora in Germany). Diaspora Erdoğanism has such a high political mobilization capacity, that it pushed this segment toward a more organized, more informed and more interventionist stance in the work places and unions than before. Like the case of Sevim Dağdelen, in many incidents, they acted as a lobbying group for preventing critics to Erdogan and his regime. Just as union secretaries avoid confrontation with AfD members in east part of Germany, they also circumvent the anger of this Islamist-Turkish nationalist bloc in areas where the Turkish diaspora is concentrated. It seems that what brought together these two right-wing groups, which engage in identity politics by denouncing and complaining about each other in daily politics, was a general leftist enmity. Although many times they threaten to quit the union over an event, publication, etc. that might criticize Erdoğan in the union or at the workplace, it should be seen that the aforementioned group cannot leave the union sphere so easily. This is because, apart from some of the socio-economic benefits of union membership, the chance of attaining a power position in the union field is greater than in other social-public fields, and those who have attained this position enjoy greater respect and esteem in Turkish diaspora for years to come.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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