Syrian Refugees in Turkey
Employment and Trade Unions’ Response

The Syrian refugee crisis is one of the largest, most protracted and unpredicted displacements in the world, and since 2011 Turkey has become the major refugee-hosting country (UNHCR 2014). According to the latest statistics by the UNHCR, 4,808,229 registered refugees have been forced to leave Syria, primarily moving to Turkey (2,724,937), Lebanon (1,033,513) and Jordan (656,198) since 2011 (UNHCR 2016). In the face of the influx of Syrian refugees, the Turkish Government declared an ‘open-door’ policy and welcomed the movement of Syrian refugees, predicting that the conflict would end swiftly and allow Syrian ‘guests’ to return home (İçduyu, 2015). After the mass Syrian influx to Turkey, the Turkish government has set up emergency camps to locate refugees, which were extended in scope to 26 camp locations in 10 provinces providing shelters, education, health and other services. However, only 10 percent of Syrians are living in the camps, while the majority have chosen or were forced to live in the centre of cities in the hope of finding decent living and working conditions. The vast majority of Syrian workers are working in the informal economy and are unable to exercise freedom of association without their employers’ applications for work permits and trade unions’ actions.

In March 2016, Turkey and EU agreed to send migrants/refugees back to Turkey, in return for the disbursement of 3 billion euros initially allocated under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey and the guaranteed funding of further projects for persons under temporary protection. Participating EU member states also agreed to lift visa requirements for Turkish citizens by the end of June 2016 (to date, this has not been realised and is still a contentious matter). Under the deal, all new irregular migrants crossing the border in masses or individually during a period of mass influx, to seek emergency and temporary protection and whose international protection request cannot be assessed individually. Moreover, the Turkish government has more recently discussed the possibility of conferring Turkish citizenship on Syrians.

The Temporary Protection Regulation provides Syrian refugees with rights and duties and sets the framework for access to the labour market. Pursuant to this Regulation, the Regulation on Work Permits of Foreigners under Temporary Protection was introduced on 15 January 2016, as improving livelihoods and enhancing decent work opportunities for Syrians became rather crucial to supplement humanitarian aid and assistance. According to this regulation, foreigners may obtain work permits six months after the date of registration of ‘temporary protection’ and in the provinces where they are permitted to reside (mostly in South-eastern Turkey). In addition, foreigners cannot be paid less than the minimum wage. One much-debated article provides that foreigners cannot exceed 10 percent of the Turkish citizens employed at a workplace.

The new law on the International Labour Force No. 6735 aiming to regulate non-Turkish citizens’ entry into Turkey’s labour market was adopted on 13 August 2016. Although there are no significant changes to the work permit procedures, some flexibilities for specific categories of professions are introduced in the new law, aiming to attract qualified foreign professionals.
such as engineers and architects, medical personnel, academicians, research and development personnel, free trade zone personnel and partners of companies, cross-border service providers and the investors. The new law has been much debated as it allows foreign professionals to work based on their own statements regarding their professions (engineering, architects) without monitoring and also providing some flexibilities and opportunities for foreign qualified professionals without considering the prohibition of discrimination (Çelik, 2016).

**Employment of Syrian Refugees**

Syrians are mainly working in the informal sector, such as seasonal agricultural work, construction, manufacturing, textile and waste picking. The age demographics of Syrians in Turkey indicate that Syrian refugees are mainly at working age: 38 percent are under 14, 60 percent are 15-64, and 1.9 percent is over 65 (DGMM, 2016). Many Syrians already actively participate in working life and encounter many problems in the labour market, among them differences in cultures and life styles, a rise in the risk of child labour, informal employment and language barriers.

Tensions between Syrian refugees and Turkish communities have been gradually increasing with regards to competition over jobs, rising rent prices, cultural differences, strains on municipal services, health services and infrastructure, especially after the recent discussions on conferring the citizenship to Syrians. Surveys show that Turkish communities are divided in their attitudes towards Syrian refugees: although they recognise the humanitarian aspect of the crisis, they are also deeply concerned about the economic and social consequences of the protracted presence of Syrian refugees in their communities (Erdoğan 2014).

One field study carried out by the ILO conducted interviews with 579 enterprises and 1592 Turkish workers in Şanlıurfa. The results indicate a number of issues to employment of Syrians: 27 percent of the businesses surveyed employ Syrians; 33 percent of Syrians are earning below the minimum wage; 60 percent of employers mention that they can employ Syrians if there is a need; 32 percent say they would never employ Syrians; 50 percent regard language as the biggest obstacle; 32 percent regard social adaptation as a barrier.

The limited access of Syrians to formal employment led to the growth in informal employment, which in turn has caused unfair competition and downward pressure on wages in sectors where the majority of Syrian refugees are earning below the minimum wage. Since the regulation on work permits has been adopted, very few employers have applied for permits for Syrian workers due to the lack of information, guidance and promotion on the legislative regulations.

**Trade Unions’ Response**

While the world and particularly European leaders are still negotiating different ways of responding to the crisis, Syrian refugees continue to suffer from the war and seek safer living conditions and decent work opportunities. Since 2011, the number of migrants/foreign workers in Turkey has doubled with the influx of Syrian refugees. It is obvious that Syrian refugees are not ‘guests’ any more. Their stay will be much longer than expected and they are already a part of Turkish society. This situation requires effective, immediate and applicable measures on supporting social integration and improving livelihoods opportunities for Syrians.

In this regard, trade unions play a crucial role in providing social integration/harmony and preventing discriminatory and hostile practices towards Syrian workers in Turkey. Although trade unionists have mainly shown empathy towards the migrant workers/refugees, the general approach of trade unions is to ignore the issue of worker’s rights of migrants/refugees in Turkey and avoid going into the effort of organising Syrians refugees and other migrants as well. (Müftüoğlu, 2015). Some trade unions have raised concerns about increasing numbers of refugees and the potential negative impact on the labour market, while others (especially progressive ones) have called for improved living standards and decent work for Syrians and also provided humanitarian assistance to the refugees. However, to date, none of them has taken any action towards organising Syrian workers.

The main problem in organising Syrian workers is that they are unable to become trade union members due to their informal employment. In Turkey the procedures for trade union membership are implemented through an e-government registration system. As only the formal workers are included in this system, only workers in the formal economy can be registered and become members of trade unions. This procedure covers both Turkish and foreign workers. However, only employers can apply for work permits for Syrian workers through e-government system. If Syrian workers wish to work formally, the employer has to apply for a work permit at the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. The work permit can only provide Syrian workers with formal employment for a one-year maximum term. Therefore, the formal employment of Syrians – and consequently their possibility of joining a union – depends on the employers’ initiative. In these circumstances, as both work permits and job security for Syrians depend on their employers’ initiative, trade union rights for Syrians in Turkey are an unlikely prospect in the near future.

Since the adoption of the regulation on work permits for foreigners under temporary protection, formal employment – and with it unionisation – has become a possibility for Syrians. But Syrians are still mostly employed informally and unfortunately this remains the biggest obstacle to organising Syrian workers.

This article reflects the personal views of the author and is not an official position of the ILO.