

Labour, Youth, and the Political Economy Behind Turkey's Recent Protests

Mehmet Erman Erol

Perspectives No. 5, May 2025

The recent protests following the arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu in late March have been widely portrayed as a political confrontation between the opposition and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). While that is partially true, this framing risks missing the broader context in which these mobilisations are situated. From a critical political economy perspective, these protests are symptomatic of a deeper, longer-running crisis rooted in Turkey's model of neoliberal authoritarianism, and particularly its impact on labour and youth. It is not a surprise, therefore, [that the young people and university students were at the forefront of the protests.](#)

Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP has pursued a version of neoliberalism marked by market liberalisation, labour market flexibilisation, and financial deepening, complemented by a neoliberal social policy regime for legitimisation, sometimes described as “neoliberalism with Turkish characteristics” or “neoliberalism with a human face.” In its early years, this model was stabilised through high levels of foreign capital inflows, international legitimacy via EU accession reforms and limited and selective ‘democratization’, and economic growth. However, this trajectory began to shift from the mid-2010s, as a series of overlapping political and geopolitical crises—most notably the Gezi Park protests (2013), the collapse of the Kurdish peace process in 2015¹, and the 2016 coup attempt—pushed the regime towards a more openly authoritarian form of governance. The consolidation of the presidential system in 2018 formalised this political shift, concentrating executive power and narrowing democratic space. Yet, this political centralisation unfolded alongside growing contradictions in the capital accumulation regime itself. Since the early 2010s, Turkey has faced the limits of its dependent financialisation strategy—a model reliant on volatile global capital inflows and persistent external imbalances. As global liquidity conditions fluctuated, Turkey's policymakers oscillated between market orthodoxy (high interest rates, tight fiscal policy) and expansionist, inflationary growth strategies (credit easing, state-led construction booms). This lack of a coherent long-term framework created macroeconomic instability, while the costs were largely passed onto labour.



Source: [Human Rights Watch](#)

Throughout these cycles, one constant has been the erosion of labour rights and working conditions. Turkey's labour markets and labour relations continue to reflect the legacy of a class offensive initiated with the 1980 military coup. As such, trade union density remains low, collective bargaining coverage is minimal, and legal protections are weakly enforced. Workers routinely face long hours—[among the highest in the OECD](#)—and precarious contracts, particularly in the growing gig economy. In 2022, [a series of strikes by delivery and platform workers](#) highlighted the worsening conditions and organisational fragmentation that define contemporary Turkish labour relations. This is complemented with a

¹ At the time of writing, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has announced a unilateral ceasefire and its formal dissolution, marking a potential end to its four-decade-long insurgency against the Turkish state. The precise contours and political-economic ramifications of this new process are yet to be seen.

high informal employment, [at around 28% of the total labour force](#). Youth have been disproportionately affected by this broader economic environment. Unemployment rates for young people have remained persistently high—[15.1% in March 2025, rising to 22.6% for women](#). Among university graduates, [this rate increases to 25%, according to the OECD](#). Headline figures only tell part of the story. Underemployment, informality, and forced emigration reflect a broader crisis of social reproduction, where higher education no longer guarantees upward mobility. In this context, emigration has increasingly become a form of political and economic exit, particularly among university graduates and professionals. At the same time, [real wages have declined](#), even as the state has announced successive minimum wage increases in recent years. Inflation—particularly in food and housing—has eroded purchasing power, and the cost of living has surged in urban centres. Long working hours, limited employment security, and lack of meritocratic hiring in the public sector have combined to create a pervasive sense of economic exclusion, especially among the youth.

The recent protests must therefore be understood not just as a response to an individual political event, but as part of a longer trajectory of disillusionment with both the economic model and the political system that sustains it. The erosion of democratic space and the degradation of economic conditions are not separate processes—they are structurally linked. Authoritarianism has become not just a political strategy, but a mechanism for managing the contradictions of a faltering economic regime. Yet, the response from institutional opposition—particularly the Republican People’s Party (CHP)—has often failed to articulate a clear alternative. While the CHP has rightly criticised political repression and called for greater democratic accountability, its economic proposals remain largely within the bounds of neoliberal orthodoxy. During the 2023 elections, for example, the CHP-led coalition proposed fiscal discipline, central bank independence, privatisation, and policies aimed at “restoring investor confidence”—positions that offered little to those demanding structural change. This disconnect between political and economic programmes limits the capacity of the opposition to address the roots of social discontent. Without a credible strategy to democratise not only politics, but also the economy, efforts to challenge authoritarianism risk becoming technocratic rather than transformative. The role of trade unions and organised labour in this moment is equally constrained. While confederations like DISK and KESK have issued statements and called for actions—such as May Day protests—legal restrictions, state repression, and internal fragmentation have limited their reach. Nonetheless, the scattered mobilisations in key sectors—logistics, delivery services, education—point to emerging forms of labour agency outside traditional union structures.

Ultimately, the significance of the current protests lies in their potential to repoliticise economic questions that have too often been sidelined in the fight against political authoritarianism, or could not be connected to it. The challenge is not only to defend democratic rights, but to link them with a broader critique of neoliberal governance and its consequences for labour, youth, and everyday life. This requires moving beyond “restoring stability” and toward labour-centred alternatives: policies that prioritise redistribution, ‘social upgrading’, collective rights, and real economic participation. A democratised Turkey cannot be built on an authoritarian economic foundation. The current unrest is a reminder that any movement for democratic renewal must also be a movement for economic justice. □

Mehmet Erman Erol is lecturer in International Relations at De Montfort University (United Kingdom), and External Faculty Associate at the Global Labour Research Centre, York University (Canada).

About Perspectives

Perspectives are concise opinion pieces meant to spark public dialogue and encourage new ways of thinking on a range of work and labour related issues. These articles are meant to inform and promote worker perspectives in a manner that challenges the current state of knowledge in a particular field.

About the Centre

The Global Labour Research Centre confronts the major challenges and injustices encountered by workers, families and communities within the global economy. The GLRC engages in the study of work, employment and labour, organizing its activities around: the impact of the changing nature of work and employment on labour rights; interrelationships between migration, citizenship and work; gender and race relations in work and labour movements; the revitalization of workers' movements; and work and health. The GLRC is a hub for pan-university collaboration with a community engagement model that encompasses a range of labour and community partners.