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Asian Perspective, Volume 49, Number 1, Winter 2025, pp. 157-182 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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Abstract: *Labor cost is an important factor influencing the Chinese capital's global investment choices. Turkey relies on cheap labor to attract foreign direct investment; however, a potential rise in labor unrest could disrupt this pattern. Our study shows that struggles for unionization, higher wages, and new rights have predominated in labor conflicts in Chinese-invested enterprises in Turkey between 2010 and 2022, and these struggles were relatively successful. On the other hand, we also found that rather than such conflicts, what sets apart labor unrest in Chinese investments from those in other major investors in Turkey is the frequency of the protests of the surplus population. The struggles that our study uncovered differ from most of the struggles of the surplus population across the world in three critical respects. First, while the protests of the surplus population generally stem from the lack of capital investment, peculiarities of recent capital investment have shaped job-demanding protests in Chinese-invested enterprises in Turkey. Second, unlike most surplus population protests, our case study highlights the demand for the employment of local workers over foreign workers, grounded in citizenship-based discourse. Finally, while surplus population protests typically target national governments, in the cases that we present, they primarily direct their grievances toward Chinese capital, pressing it to prioritize local hiring over importing labor from China.*

Keywords: *labor unrest, Global China, Belt and Road Initiative, foreign direct investment, surplus population, Turkey.*

THE RAPID EXPANSION OF CHINESE FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT (FDI) RAISES vital concerns regarding its political, environmental, social, and economic implications. Alongside the literature predominantly focusing on the motives, implementation, benefits, and harms of China's global investments, there is a growing body of literature on the impact of Chinese

Asian Perspective 49 (2025), 157–182

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investments on workers in recipient countries. Following the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, the significance of this issue has increased. This article contributes to the growing literature by examining the trajectory of labor unrest in Chinese investments in Turkey, a BRI member since 2015.

China has rapidly become a significant global investor in recent decades, culminating in the BRI. As of July 2022, the aggregate Chinese investments under the BRI have reached an astounding US\$932 billion (Wang 2022), amounting to nearly seven times the United States' spending through the Marshall Plan after World War II when adjusted for inflation (Hillman 2020, 4). Most of China's global investments, including the BRI, aim to find a spatial fix to the overaccumulation of capital and excess capacity in certain sectors of the Chinese economy (Hung 2018). According to Nugent and Lu (2021, 16), "compared to BRI-oriented outward FDI from China in other sectors, the BRI has increased China's FDI outflows to BRI countries by 79 percent for overcapacity-related sectors."

Chinese companies bring many workers from China to the countries in which they invest. They also hire many local workers, making local wage levels a critical factor to consider. The extant literature demonstrates that Chinese FDI outflows predominantly target regions with low labor costs. Zou et al. (2022) illustrate that unprofitable Chinese firms seek locations abroad with cheaper labor to restore profitability. Neel's (2021, 612) comparison of Ethiopia with Kenya and Tanzania reveals that abundant cheap labor was a significant factor behind greater Chinese FDI flow to Ethiopia. Huang, Huang, and Mai (2024) also acknowledge cheap labor as an important factor contributing to substantial Chinese investment in Ethiopia.

Chinese firms' preference for cheap labor has implications for their engagement with Turkey. Although the minimum wage in Turkey was higher than in China, even in cities with the highest minimum wage levels,¹ the average salary in Turkey was lower than in China by 2022.² More importantly, according to a recent World Bank report (2022, vii), compared to its competitors in Central and Eastern Europe and the Middle East and North Africa, Turkey is above average only in 2 of the 18 FDI-impacting factors: availability of talent and low labor cost. Hence, Chinese firms investing in these regions also consider Turkey's relatively low labor cost.

Considering low labor costs as a significant motive for Chinese firms, labor unrest in investment recipient countries appears to be a crucial counteracting factor. Hence, we should pay attention to labor unrest

to assess the trajectories of Chinese FDI outflows. The emerging Global China literature demonstrates that although Chinese investors' practices regarding labor rights are far from uniform, Chinese firms face labor unrest across the world. Such protests occur in highly diverse settings such as Africa (Huang, Huang, and Mai 2024), Central Asia (Vakulchuk and Overland 2019), and Southeast Asia (Renwick 2015).

Our article contributes to the existing literature in two crucial ways. As aforementioned, low labor cost is critical for FDI inflows to Turkey. A rise in labor unrest in Turkey may challenge foreign investors benefiting from low wages. Therefore, there is a need for empirical studies of labor unrest in the Chinese-invested enterprises. An empirical analysis of the causes, processes, and consequences of labor unrest in Chinese-invested enterprises is the first contribution of this study to the literature. In addition, a distinctive feature of Chinese FDI is the employment of many Chinese workers in their overseas investments compared to all other major global investors (Bergesen 2013). This reliance on Chinese migrant workers, however, sparked a novel and peculiar type of protest demanding local employment. Accordingly, the second and more important contribution of this study is a theoretical engagement with the labor studies literature by uncovering this underexplored type of labor unrest.

This article consists of seven sections. Following this introduction, the second section elaborates on our theoretical foundations. The third section explains our methodology. The fourth section takes a bird's eye view of labor unrest in Chinese-invested enterprises in Turkey. The fifth section discusses Marx-type unrest that dominates these conflicts, and the sixth section examines the protests of the surplus population. The concluding section encapsulates the main arguments of this article.

Theoretical Perspective

In her landmark study *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization Since 1870*, Beverly J. Silver (2003) argues that rising workers' movements extract significant concessions from capitalists, contributing to recurrent crises of profitability, and capital responds to such crises with spatial fixes, relocating to areas with relatively docile and cheaper labor. Silver argues that these processes of making and unmaking of working classes create two types of labor movements. First, in areas where capital attempts to leave labor behind, working classes struggle against being unmade, i.e., losing their jobs and previously

won rights. Struggles against plant closures and privatization of public enterprises belong to this category. Silver calls such defensive battles waged by old working classes as “Polanyi-type” labor unrest. Second, emerging working classes struggle for novel gains such as unionization, higher wages, and better working conditions in regions where capital relocates. Silver (2003) calls these offensive struggles “Marx-type” labor unrest.

Recently, Silver and Karataşlı (2015) and Karataşlı et al. (2015) introduced a novel, third type of labor unrest. Basing their analysis on Karl Marx’s concept of the “stagnant relative surplus population,” they argue that capitalism’s speed of slashing jobs is far beyond its capacity to create new ones. They categorize the protests of the stagnant relative surplus population whose primary demand is employment as the third type of labor unrest. These protests do not occur where capital comes to (Marx-type) or departs from (Polanyi-type), but where capital “bypasses” (Karataşlı et al. 2015, 192–196; Silver and Karataşlı 2015, 139–140). Furthermore, whereas the Marx and Polanyi types of unrest target “either the employer directly or the state as an intermediary or as an agent of capital” (Silver 2003, 37), the third type of unrest primarily targets the state rather than capital. By identifying this third type, Silver and Karataşlı et al. opened up a novel and important avenue of research that the existing labor studies literature has yet to sufficiently explore.

Table 1. Characteristics of Different Types of Labor Unrest

	Marx-type	Polanyi-type	Third type	Fourth type
Capital	Incoming	Departing	Bypassing	Incoming
Protesters	Newly emerging working classes	Working classes that are being unmade	Surplus population	Surplus population ³
Demand	Extension of rights	Protection of rights	Employment	Employment
Commodification of labor	Against	Against	For	For
Vertical target	Capital	Capital	State	Capital (foreign)
Horizontal target	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Indeterminate	Foreign workers

We present our empirical findings by engaging with the aforementioned three types of labor unrest. As we will demonstrate, Polanyi-type unrest, which typically occurs when capital departs, is absent in our cases because most Chinese enterprises in Turkey have been recently established. Marx-type protests have been the predominant form of labor unrest in our cases and have achieved considerable success. Less predictably and more interestingly, we detected relatively frequent protests by local populations against the employment of Chinese workers, especially in mining and energy projects. Protests against Chinese workers in Turkey share important similarities with Silver's and Karataşlı et al.'s three types, particularly the third type, but also differ significantly. Therefore, we identify these protests as a fourth type of labor unrest (see Table 1). We must emphasize that we are adding this fourth type primarily for heuristic purposes and not for the creation of a strict taxonomy. Future comparative analyses of anti-foreign labor protests in various countries may lead to a more precise categorization of these protests, either as a subcategory of the third type or as a distinct fourth type.

As Silver notes, both Marx-type and Polanyi-type unrest are directed against the commodification of labor. While Marx-type unrest includes “struggles against being treated as a commodity at the point of production,” Polanyi-type unrest involves “struggles against being treated as a commodity in the labor market” (Silver 2003, 182). In contrast, the core demand of the third and fourth types of protests is wage employment. Hence, they support the commodification of labor. The surplus population can turn against labor commodification only after being incorporated into the active labor force.

More importantly, Silver and Karataşlı et al. are correct that the lack of capital investment (“bypassing”) causes the protests of the third type. In the fourth type, protests occur when/where capital invests but prefers foreign workers over the local workforce. It is not capital “bypassing” but certain peculiarities of capital investment that give rise to the fourth-type unrest. This aspect also makes their targets different. Unlike the Arab Spring and the protests of the jobless in various European countries after 2008, where protesters vertically targeted the governments for the provision of jobs—along with other economic and political demands—(Karataşlı et al. 2015), in cases where capital brings labor from outside, the vertical target of protests is capital itself, and the demand is specific: hire local workers.

The same is true for horizontal targeting. We know that “the history of workers’ mobilizations has been deeply interconnected with mobilizations along racial, gender, ethnic, and citizenship lines” (Silver and

Karataşlı 2015, 140). On the other hand, “who uses boundary drawing (and how) . . . cannot be determined a priori from theoretical considerations. It is instead a question to be answered on the basis of historical-empirical analysis” (Silver 2003, 24). Boundary drawing is not a defining feature of the prevalent examples of the third type, such as the Arab Spring and the protests of the jobless in Europe, although anti-immigrant discontent among the workers has provided ample ground for the rise of the far-right across Europe. In contrast, boundary drawing by excluding foreign workers is a defining characteristic of the fourth-type unrest.

Methodology

Our definition of Chinese-invested enterprises includes enterprises owned or operated entirely or partly by Chinese firms. To create a list of these enterprises, we utilized the data released by the Ministry of Industry and Technology of Turkey, which provides a list of active foreign companies in the country as of June 30, 2022 (TC Sanayi ve Teknoloji Bakanlığı 2022). However, when tracing the movements of Chinese capital globally, official data are usually unreliable (Horn, Reinhart, and Trebesch 2020), which is also the case in Turkey (Gürel and Kozluca 2022b). The Ministry’s data suffers from additional problems. For example, Xiaomi, a well-known Chinese company, appears as a Singaporean company in the list since Xiaomi’s Singaporean branch is the legal entity that founded its Turkish branch. To avoid such problems as much as possible, we crosschecked the Ministry’s list with the Turkish Trade Registry Gazette (*Türkiye Ticaret Sicil Gazetesi*, TTRG, n.d.). According to the Turkish Commercial Code, it is compulsory to issue certain documents related to companies established in the country in the TTRG, and these documents are publicly accessible. These documents contain information about the shares of owners, managers, and headquarters.

For the data on labor unrest, we utilized the annual reports of the Labor Studies Group (*Emek Çalışmaları Topluluğu*, EÇT) between 2015 and 2021 (Emek Çalışmaları Topluluğu 2015–2021). EÇT is an independent research group whose primary goal is to track and analyze the trajectory of the labor movement in Turkey. EÇT collects data from the local and national press and various online sources. EÇT reports provide the names and locations of the enterprises where workers organized strikes and protests.

By using the data provided by the EÇT, Ministry of Industry and Technology, and the TTRG, we identified the national origins of all companies where labor unrest occurred between 2015 and 2022. To broaden the temporal scope of our investigation and account for any possible overlooked protest, we conducted a complementary web search utilizing Interpress (Interpress n.d.), a media monitoring agency that includes the record of both imprint and digital media archives of the Turkish press. Using the Ministry’s list, we searched the names of companies with keywords including “strike” (*grev*), “boycott” (*boykot*), “press statement” (*basın açıklaması*), “demonstration” (*gösteri*), “lay off” (*işten çıkarma*), “protest” (*protesto*), “resistance” (*direniş*), “riot” (*isyan*), “work stoppage” (*iş durdurma/yavaşlatma*), “labor union” (*sendika*), and “worker” (*işçi*). We did further web search by using the keyword of nationality indicator (Chinese) combined with keywords like “investment” (*yatırım*), “company” (*şirket*), “firm” (*firma*), and “capital” (*sermaye*). We also checked the publications of various labor unions. Lastly, we consulted with labor scholars and union experts to find out about the consequences of conflicts when the relevant information was not available from online sources. Based on this research, our article provides the most reliable and up-to-date data on labor unrest in Chinese-invested enterprises in Turkey.

A Bird’s Eye View of Labor Unrest in Chinese-invested Enterprises in Turkey

Table 2 provides information about the year of establishment, scale, and location of the enterprises where labor unrest occurred, categories of unrest (Marx-type and the fourth type), and their consequences. While official records may not offer precise net investment amounts, they still provide approximate amounts for establishing these enterprises. According to our classification, a large enterprise has over 100 million Turkish Liras (about US\$3.3 million as of January 2024) as official capital stock.

To keep the table simple, we did not provide detailed information about the organizational support—of labor unions, political parties, and democratic mass organizations—to the listed labor struggles. Suffice it to say that small socialist organizations supported the struggling workers from outside in most instances, especially in conflicts that occurred in industrial heartlands of large cities like İstanbul and Kocaeli. In some cases, large opposition parties such as the center-left Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) and the pro-Kurdish Peo-

ples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP) provided support, which helped these protests to gain more media attention.

As Table 2 shows, we found 20 Chinese-invested enterprises where labor unrest occurred between 2010 and 2022. Out of 20, 15 enterprises witnessed only Marx-type unrest, making it the predominant form. Two enterprises faced only the fourth-type unrest driven by anti-Chinese employment demands. Both the Marx- and fourth-type unrest occurred in three enterprises. Table 2 also shows that 9 out of 20 enterprises witnessed more than one labor conflict. Hence, to assess the degree of success/failure of workers' struggles, we need to count incidents rather than enterprises. We counted 39 incidents based on this method. There is one ongoing legal case (Formplast) whose success/failure remains undetermined. Out of the remaining 38 cases, 27 cases (71 percent) ended with workers' success, while 11 cases ended with failure (29 percent). Notably, we found 11 enterprises where workers' unionization triggered unrest. Workers successfully unionized in 9 of them, whereas the unionization drive failed in only one enterprise, and there is an ongoing case. Some of these unions are *relatively* combative and left-wing, e.g., Birleşik Metal-İş, while others are quite right-wing and business-friendly, e.g., Türk Metal. Nevertheless, since unionization raises workers' bargaining power, the high level of success of unionization-driven conflicts shows that labor unrest has put certain obstacles to Chinese capital in Turkey.

Marx-type Labor Unrest

After taking a bird's eye view, we can now move to a detailed examination. We will start with Trendyol, a retail giant and one of the largest Chinese investments in Turkey. We will then move to labor conflicts in various sectors.

In 2018, Chinese giant Alibaba Group purchased the majority of the shares of Trendyol. In 2021, the company became Turkey's largest e-commerce company, with a total value of US\$16.5 billion (Tavsan 2021). At the end of 2021, the couriers of Trendyol started protesting in İstanbul after getting a 10 percent raise in their wages. All around the country, workers found this rate quite low compared to rapidly soaring living costs, and protests spread to numerous cities. Thousands of Trendyol couriers stopped work and organized rallies across the country for three days (*Sputnik Türkiye* 2021). Protests were prolonged until 2022 and ended successfully when workers received a 39 percent wage raise (*Cumhuriyet* 2022).

Table 2. Labor Unrest in Chinese-invested Enterprises in Turkey, 2010–2022

Enterprise	Year of investment	Year(s) of and count of unrest incidents	Scale of investment	Location (District/City)	Type of unrest	Result
Deteks/Yelken	2005	2010 (1)	Small	Bağcılar/İstanbul	Marx-type	Success
Teyo Tufanbeyli Power Station	2012	2015 (1)	Large	Tufanbeyli/Adana	Fourth type	Failure
Hattat Holding Hema Industry	2012	2014, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 (9)	Large	Amasra/Bartın & Ereğli/Zonguldak	Marx-type (2014, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2022) & fourth type (2017, 2020, and 2021)	Success (in 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019) & failure (in 2020, 2021, 2022)
Ciner Holding	2013	2017 (1)	Large	Şirvan/Siirt	Fourth type	Failure
Shangri-La Hotel	2013	2017 (1)	Small	Beşiktaş/İstanbul	Marx-type	Failure
Chinatool	2010	2017-2018-2019-2020 (4)	Small	Gebze/Kocaeli	Marx-type	Success
HT Solar	2016	2017-2018-2021 (3)	Large	Tuzla/İstanbul	Marx-type	Success
CSUN	2013	2018 (1)	Large	Tuzla/İstanbul	Marx-type	Success
Fil Man Made	2006	2018 (1)	Small	Çerkezköy/Tekirdağ	Marx-type	Success
Soma Kolin Thermal Plant	2014	2018 (2)	Large	Soma/Manisa	Marx-type & fourth type	Failure (Marx-type), Success (fourth type)

Table 2, continued.

Enterprise	Year of investment	Year(s) of and count of unrest incidents	Scale of investment	Location (District/City)	Type of unrest	Result
Formplast	2011	2019 (1)	Small	Bozüyük/Bilecik	Marx-type	Ongoing legal process
Emba Electricity Production	2013	2020-2021 (2)	Large	Yumurtalık/Adana	Marx-type (in 2020) & fourth type (in 2021)	Success (in 2020) & failure (in 2021).
Nesko Mining	2014	2020 (1)	Large	Yenice/Çanakkale	Marx-type	Success
Chen Solar	2017	2020-2021 (2)	Small	Tuzla/İstanbul	Marx-type	Success
SML Etiket	2001	2021 (1)	Small	Avcılar & Üsküdar/İstanbul	Marx-type	Success
Tecno Mobile	2021	2021 (1)	Large	Pendik/İstanbul	Marx-type	Success
Oppo	2021	2021-2022 (2)	Large	Tuzla/İstanbul	Marx-type	Failure
Trendyol	2018	2021-2022 (2)	Large	Multiple cities	Marx-type	Success
Xiaomi	2019	2021-2022 (2)	Large	Avcılar/İstanbul	Marx-type	Success (in 2021) & failure (in 2022).
Vivo	2020	2022 (1)	Large	Gebze/Kocaeli	Marx-type	Success

Another Marx-type protest occurred at Xiaomi, a famous Chinese smartphone brand. The Turkish branch of Xiaomi launched its operations in İstanbul in 2019. Eager to attract manufacturing FDI, the Turkish government provided a generous subsidy package to Xiaomi for a seven-year period (*Ekmek ve Gül* 2022). Xiaomi initially announced that it would hire 2,000 workers; however, only 800 workers were actually employed. Frustrated with consecutive late and underpaid wages, a group of workers attempted to unionize in 2021, to which Xiaomi responded by firing 180 workers. Workers responded with a series of demonstrations, which ended with success. On October 1, 2021, Xiaomi signed a collective labor contract with Türk Metal Union and hired the dismissed workers back (*Evrensel* 2021). However, the company was nervous about the presence of a large number of combative workers. Only six months after the signing of the collective labor contract, Xiaomi fired 110 workers in March 2022. This mass lay-off triggered protests consisting of demonstrations at the factory gate. In addition to socialist groups, some CHP and HDP deputies from the parliament also came to support the workers. During protests, some workers complained that Türk Metal, a right-wing, business-friendly union, cooperated with Xiaomi and gave tacit support to lay-offs (*Evrensel* 2022). Although workers continued the struggle for about a month, the struggle failed.

Tecno Mobile is another Chinese smartphone manufacturer which opened up a factory in İstanbul in 2021. Just three months after the factory's opening, 173 workers were unionized. As a result, 12 workers were fired. These workers responded by holding demonstrations in front of the factory. In their press statements, workers said that the company fired them to prevent unionization and threatened other workers that they would face a similar fate if they supported the laid-off workers (*Birgün* 2021). The struggle succeeded. Türk Metal got the legal right to bargain and sign a collective labor contract (*Türk Metal* 2021).

Vivo is the fourth Chinese smartphone manufacturer that witnessed labor unrest in Turkey. The company started its operations in 2020 with an investment of US\$20 million. It promised to create 2,000 jobs, aiming to manufacture 5 million smartphones annually. Labor conflicts at the factory began in 2022 after two leading workers doing union organizing were fired. Workers responded by stopping work and holding demonstrations (*Gerçek* 2022b). Subsequently, 39 more workers were fired. Workers continued demonstrations. The struggle succeeded. Türk Metal got the legal right to bargain and sign a collective labor contract, and the laid-off workers were hired back (*Gerçek* 2022c).

Labor conflicts also occurred at Chinese green energy companies. One such case happened at HT Solar, a venture of Chinese HT-SAAE. HT Solar is one of the Chinese-invested enterprises in Turkey that has witnessed the most intensive and sustained labor conflicts so far. In its factory in Tuzla/Istanbul, which employs over 600 workers, HT Solar manufactures solar cells and panels. In 2017, in response to the dismissal of six union-organizing workers, workers occupied the factory and went on strike for three days. The Chinese manager of the enterprise contacted the Chinese Consulate General in Istanbul to pressure the Turkish authorities to suppress the occupation by all means necessary. Nevertheless, these efforts failed, and the management accepted the Birleşik Metal-İş union as the legal representative of the workers (*Gerçek* 2017). Successful unionization increased the workers' bargaining power dramatically. The factory management's attempts to weaken the union in subsequent years failed due to workers' unified resistance. As a result, the collective labor contract signed by the management and the union for the 2020–2022 period brought a substantial wage increase and other gains to workers (*Gerçek* 2020a).

Likewise, Chen Solar, a Chinese-owned solar energy factory operating in Tuzla/Istanbul has faced recurring labor unrest. The process started after several workers were laid off in 2020, and workers believed this was related to the union membership. Their resistance forced the company to rehire the laid-off workers (*Gerçek* 2020b). In 2021, unionized workers protested the working conditions and eventually signed a collective labor contract that protected their interests (*Gerçek* 2022a).

By partnering with their Turkish counterparts, Chinese mining companies have become quite active in the country—even in the remote corners—in recent years. Capital-labor relations are especially strained in Turkey's mines, where precarious jobs, insecure working conditions, and anti-union management prevail. Labor unrest against these conditions also occurs in Chinese-invested mines. A case in point is Nesko Mining. According to TTRG, 50 percent of its shares are owned by Ji-angxi Copper, 48 percent by Beijing Metal Challenge, and 2 percent by CRM International Beijing. The company operates five mines in Turkey. After four months of unpaid wages in 2020 and the lay-off of 11 workers attempting to unionize, 40 workers launched a resistance by locking themselves inside the copper mine in Çanakkale. The representatives of the main opposition party, CHP, visited the mine to support workers. Protests successfully concluded after the governor of Çanakkale came to the mine and assured the workers that their demands would be met by the company (*sendika.org* 2020).

Another case occurred at Emba Electricity. It was initially a Turkish company. In 2013, Shanghai Electric Power acquired 50.01 percent of the company's shares, and its share rose to 78 percent in 2016. The Emba Hunutlu Power Plant, which is so far the largest Chinese FDI in Turkey, started its operation in 2022. The project was financed by three Chinese banks. About 2,700 Chinese workers were employed at various stages of its construction (*Financial Times* 2022). In 2020, construction workers were forced to take unpaid leave, with the notification that they would ultimately be fired. Moreover, the workers were already disgruntled with unpaid wages and poor working conditions. Indeed, one of the protesters stated, "Chinese are not even providing us soaps to wash our hands." The protests occurred during the unpaid leave phase. Following the involvement of local officials, who promised that no layoffs would happen and working conditions would be improved, the conflict ended (*Ceyhan Express Haber* 2020).

One of our most controversial cases occurred at Hattat Holding Hema Industry. Hattat is a large holding company operating in multiple sectors with many subsidiaries. It has joint ventures with various Chinese firms. One of them is the Hema Industry, which carries out energy projects—including natural gas production, coal mining, and the construction of a thermal plant—in Amasra port town in Bartın, a city in the western Black Sea region. Hema Industry partners with many Chinese companies, including DATONG, Qitaihe Long Coal Mining, Dongfang Electric, Harbin Electric International, and China Avic International. The project can be considered one of the largest Chinese investments in Turkey. As Table 2 shows, it has faced recurring labor unrest. Turkish government actively supports these ventures by providing permits for Chinese workers and facilitating the privatization of mines (transferring the management rights of nominally state-owned mines to Hema and its partners).

About 1,200 Hema workers joined the GMİS union in 2012 (*Dünya* 2012). The first Marx-type protest at Hema was in 2014. Following Hema's decision to close the mine, workers marched to the Zonguldak governorship, which ended with a quick success (*sendika.org* 2014). In 2015, over 300 workers protested due to underpaid wages through work stoppage, and a deputy from CHP brought the issue to the Turkish parliament. After this, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security ordered the payment of unpaid wages (*Bartın Olay* 2015). In 2017, Hema fired 28 unionized workers (*Gazete Duvar* 2017). After workers' resistance, the GMİS union obtained the legal right to sign a collective labor contract on workers' behalf (*Halkın Sesi Gazetesi* 2017). In 2018, underpaid wages remained a serious problem, and a massive lay-off—

predominantly of unionized workers—occurred. As a response, workers protested with the participating locals. Two of these workers locked themselves at the top of a crane tower. Following a phone call from the Ministry of Energy, the company accepted workers' demands (Evrensel 2018). In 2019, similarly, protests occurred against the dismissal of 98 workers and unpaid wages (Habertürk 2019). Again, workers were paid as a result of their actions.

Overall, excluding one ongoing case, 25 out of 31 Marx-type cases of unrest resulted in success. Furthermore, in 28 out of 32 cases (including Marx- and fourth-type unrest), a labor union was present to support workers. Nine out of 11 unionization struggles succeeded.⁴ Therefore, we can safely conclude that strikes and protests have enabled the workers to unionize and extract tangible concessions from Chinese firms.

The Fourth-type Labor Unrest: “Don’t Hire the Chinese!”

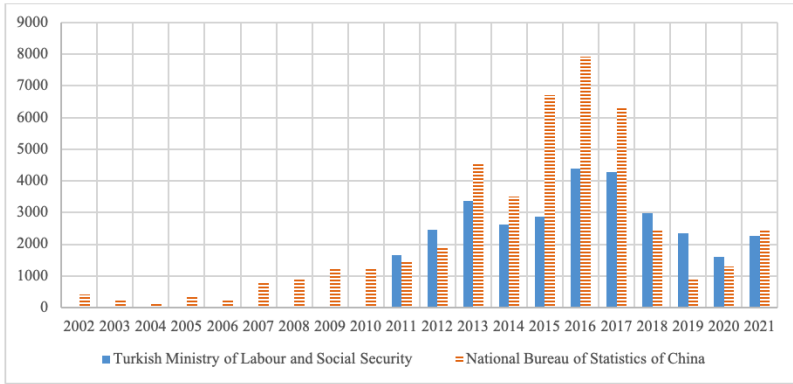
The previous section has revealed the dominance and significant success of Marx-type labor unrest in Chinese-invested enterprises in Turkey. However, what distinguishes the labor unrest in these enterprises from those of other countries is not the prevalence of Marx-type struggles but the occurrence of protests by local populations against the employment of foreign workers. Such actions frequently occur in Chinese enterprises because, unlike the FDI originating from other countries, which usually bring a small number of managers, engineers, and exceptionally skilled workers to host countries, Chinese firms dispatch thousands of Chinese workers to their overseas investments.

The existing literature highlights that several factors, including affordability, skill level, cultural and linguistic affinity, and the alleged docility of Chinese labor, drive the employment of Chinese migrant workers (Cooke 2014; Jackson 2014). Furthermore, dispatching Chinese workers abroad is identified as a critical component of China’s “spatial fix,” which allows the country to relocate some of its surplus industrial capacity internationally, thus mitigating mass unemployment to the greatest extent possible (Lai 2021). Notably, the total number of Chinese workers abroad had reached 368,000 by the year 2019, underscoring the scale of this phenomenon (Ghiselli and Morgan 2023, 1824).

Figure 1 displays the size of the Chinese workforce in Turkey based on official sources (National Bureau of Statistics of China, compiled by Ghiselli and Morgan 2023,⁵ T.C. Çalışma ve Sosyal Güvenlik Bakanlığı,

2011–2021⁶). The discrepancy between the two countries’ official statistics is apparent, reinforcing distrust about the accuracy of the reported numbers. Figure 1 also shows that in parallel with the significant rise of Chinese FDI stock in Turkey after 2015 (Gürel and Kozluca 2022b, 815), the number of Chinese workers in the country rapidly increased.

Figure 1. Number of Chinese Workers in Turkey, 2002–2021



The response of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) government, which has been in power in Turkey since November 2002, to the discontent fueled by the increasing presence of Chinese workers has been inconsistent. In the early 2000s, work permit regulations were considerably strict. They included a requirement to prove that no worker in Turkey was capable of performing the same job. About 200 Chinese workers were denied work permits on this ground in just one instance in 2004 (*Hürriyet* 2004). Furthermore, in 2010, the then Minister of Labor and Social Security adopted an explicitly adverse stance against the employment of Chinese workers:

These days, I am receiving a lot of requests from companies employing Chinese workers. They ask, “Why don’t you permit the workers?” I tell them, “Are you expecting a solution from me for unemployment? Then why are you seeking special treatment? Is a Chinese worker more qualified than my worker? Are you aware that there are 20,000 Chinese workers in this country?” (*Dünya Bülteni* 2010)

However, later on, work permit regulations became more lenient. Indeed, the current criterion for work permits only stipulates the employment of five Turkish citizens in a workplace that employs foreign workers (Çalışma İzni, n.d.). Nonetheless, the government's reactions to specific investments are both inconsistent and spatially varying. For instance, one of the reasons for the stall in the recent Sino-Turkish negotiations about the Edirne-Kars railway modernization project was the Chinese side's insistence on "using Chinese labor brought from China," while Turkish officials "requested the employment of local labor" (Ergenç and Göçer 2023, 13–14). On the other hand, we observe that Chinese firms mostly prefer to employ Chinese workers in remote areas of Turkey, where information scarcity and a lack of transparency regarding enterprises and labor-capital relations prevail. As Table 2 shows, all five firms where fourth-type labor unrest was observed are located in remote areas, not in large cities or renowned industrial zones such as Gebze and Tuzla.

The Emba Hunutlu Thermal Power Plant is one of our cases of the fourth-type labor unrest driven by the local population's demand from Chinese companies to hire Turkish citizens. As mentioned above, as of 2023, this plant is the largest Chinese investment in Turkey. By early 2020, 198 of the total 900 workers in the project were Chinese (Çukurova Express 2020). The project received explicit support from the Turkish government. This was evidenced at its opening ceremony on December 17, 2022, which was attended by the Chinese ambassador Liu Shaobin and the Turkish Minister of Energy and Natural Resources Alparslan Bayraktar. During the event, Bayraktar highlighted the power plant as a "symbolic project" of the Belt and Road Initiative (*Dünya* 2022). Local people claimed that during the initial phase of the construction, a protocol was signed between the company and local peasants that they would be employed. However, later, this promise was not honored, and even the existence of the protocol was denied. As a response, in 2021, local villagers blocked the road in front of the facility to demand employment. Police intervened by using pepper spray, resulting in the detention of 10 people. The protests garnered support from CHP representatives (*Sözcü* 2021).

Soma Kolin Thermal Power Plant, a partnership of Harbin Electric International and Kolin Holding, known for its strong ties with the Turkish government, is a similar case. Local workers estimated that between 350–500 Chinese workers were employed since the beginning of the power plant construction. In April 2018, about 2,000 local workers were dismissed. Soon after, rumors spread that more Chinese workers would

come to replace the laid-off local workers. In a tweet dated July 13, 2018, Ali Bülent Erdem, the President of the Tobacco Workers Union (*Tütün-Sen*), claimed that about 1,500 workers would be brought from China, and 500 of them had already arrived (Erdem 2018). Workers then decided to hold a demonstration against the bringing of more Chinese workers. After hearing this plan, company officials immediately responded, promising that no more Chinese workers would come and the ones working would return to China soon. Workers canceled their demonstrations after getting this promise (*Artı Gerçek* 2018). However, even after this success, local workers did not totally calm down. They said that if the promises are not kept, the situation will get worse:

In Soma, unemployment is at its peak. Although there are so many unemployed people here, Chinese workers were brought in from outside. Now, to not lose our livelihoods, we and the Chinese workers could end up in conflict. In general, we are not treated like human beings. We don't want to be treated as second-class citizens. . . . Chinese workers should be employed in their own country (*soL* 2018).

One of these workers confirmed the risk of anti-Chinese violence:

If a man who provides a living for his family has been fired due to a Chinese worker, will that man look the other way? He won't. If a Chinese person dies here, he will die. A Chinese may indeed die here. This could lead to a crisis between the two countries. There is such tension. There is no problem at the moment, but it may happen. (*Artı Gerçek* 2018)

Another similar case occurred within the mines of Ciner Group, a grand Turkish holding company operating in diverse sectors with many subsidiaries. In 2006, the owner of the company admitted the employment of approximately 300 Chinese workers and engineers in his mine near the Maden Village in Siirt (*Hürriyet* 2006). A disastrous accident in the mine on November 18, 2016, which resulted in the death of 16 workers, sparked labor unrest. Workers, labor unions, and pro-labor non-governmental organizations argued that poor safety measures caused the deadly incident. The company decided to end its activity in the region after the event, which led to the dismissal of 450 workers. Following this lay-off, rumors began to spread that Ciner Group was seeking to transfer the mine operation to a Chinese company without any name specified. The laid-off workers organized sit-in protests at the gates of the mine in January 2017. Cevher Arık, the president of Maden Village

Workers Park Electric Union, told the press that although the company promised not to fire anyone after the disaster, 450 workers were already dismissed, and about 300 Chinese workers were brought to the mine for work within just a week after the lay-off. Arık called the administration to rehire the laid-off workers and not bring Chinese workers to the mine (*Evrensel* 2017a; *Rûdaw* 2017; *soL* 2017). Moreover, on January 14, 2017, Kadri Yıldırım, Siirt deputy of the pro-Kurdish HDP, held a press conference in the Turkish parliament and claimed that 450 Chinese workers had been brought to the mine to replace the local workers, and 150 of them had already started work (*Evrensel* 2017b).

Our final example is the Hema Industry, which we introduced in the previous section. In 2017, after 28 local workers were laid off as redundant labor, the company employed 50 Chinese workers. In their protests, workers argued that Hema only cares about profits, views the Chinese as a cheap labor force, and does not fulfill its earlier promises to local people (*Gazete Duvar* 2017). This protest succeeded, and workers were hired back. In 2020, Bartın Platform, an environmental non-governmental organization that is very critical of Hema's activities in the region, issued a press statement arguing that the mines Hema operates should be transferred to the state since Hema employs Chinese workers, not locals (*Halkın Sesi Gazetesi* 2020). In 2021, the platform issued another press statement, which explicitly argued that "All around the world, Chinese companies are excluding locals and employing only Chinese workers, the mines are the national values of Turkey, and they should be state-owned for the interest of local people" (*sendika.org* 2021). In addition to these nationalistic appeals, protesters occasionally adopted a more internationalistic discourse, criticizing Hema for the super-exploitation of Chinese workers. For example, the Bartın Platform, along with many local residents, wrote a letter to several Chinese companies accusing Hema of exploiting workers and urging them not to collaborate with Hema (*Bartınstar* 2021). Interestingly, one of the co-chairmen of the platform was later elected mayor of the city and declared that they were only against the construction of thermal power plants, promising full support for anyone investing in coal mining, including Hema Industry, during a meeting with the company's owner (*Bartınstar* 2022).

Conclusion

The rapid expansion of the Chinese FDI has appeared as a spatial fix to the country's industrial overcapacity problem. Although various push

and pull factors are at play, labor cost remains an important factor behind the Chinese capital's choice of investment destinations. Low labor costs are also a significant factor in attracting FDI to Turkey. Hence, approaching the FDI in Turkey from a labor-oriented perspective is necessary. As the existing literature shows, capital cannot infinitely avoid rising labor costs because emerging working classes can improve their wages, working conditions, and other social rights through class struggle. Hence, a possible future rise of labor unrest can challenge Turkey's existing way of attracting FDI based on cheap labor.

Our analysis shows that Marx-type struggles have prevailed in labor unrest cases in Turkey's Chinese-invested enterprises. About three-quarters of these struggles succeeded. Notably, workers' struggle to unionize ended with success in 9 out of 11 enterprises. Although some of these unions are right-wing and business-friendly, since unionization generally improves workers' chances of bargaining for higher wages and new social rights, the successful record of unionization-driven conflicts shows that labor unrest has put certain obstacles to Chinese capital in Turkey.

Our research also shows that what distinguishes the labor unrest in Chinese investments from that in other major investors in Turkey is the protests against the employment of Chinese workers and the demand for jobs for the local labor force. Our review of the literature on labor conflicts in Chinese-invested enterprises in other countries, especially those in the Global South, shows that this has become a global phenomenon. Such protests occur visibly much more frequently in Chinese FDI than in other countries' FDIs because, unlike the companies of different national origins, which bring a limited number of managers, engineers, and skilled workers to their investments abroad, Chinese enterprises employ thousands of Chinese workers in their overseas investments.

This finding holds significant implications for the global literature on labor movements. The recent works of Silver and Karataşlı (2015) and Karataşlı et al. (2015) have contributed notably by identifying a third type of labor unrest, distinct from Marx- and Polanyi-types. This type is characterized by the stagnant relative surplus population's growing demand for employment, particularly noticeable since the 2008 crisis. The present study builds upon this by identifying a fourth type of labor unrest, centered around anti-Chinese protests, which enables further development of their analysis.

First, we agree with Silver and Karataşlı (2015) and Karataşlı et al. (2015) that the bypassing of many regions by capital is a primary cause of protests among surplus populations. Our study, however, clear-

ly demonstrates that it is the recent configurations of capital investment, rather than its bypassing, that have triggered job-demanding labor unrest in Chinese-invested enterprises in Turkey.

Second, while agreeing with Silver, Karataşlı, and their colleagues that most protests of the stagnant relative surplus labor target national governments for the lack of decent jobs, our findings reveal that in Turkey, the primary focus of protestors is Chinese capital.

Third, in contrast to Silver and Karataşlı et al.'s accounts, which do not consider the employment of foreign workers as a cause of unrest, our study documents protests that horizontally target Chinese workers using a citizenship-based, nationalist discourse. Comparative studies of similar protests at Chinese enterprises in various countries could further enrich our framework, linking it to changing FDI patterns, particularly in the context of China's emergence as a global investor.

Moreover, analyzing these protests could enhance our understanding of the rise of the far-right. The identification of 'horizontal' targets based on national distinctions may fuel right-wing nationalist movements. While Turkish far-right organizations have occasionally protested against the Chinese government's treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, our research uncovered only one instance, in 2015, where a protest explicitly targeted Chinese workers. This event was organized by a Turkish far-right group in the Kilimli district of Zonguldak, in the western Black Sea region, demanding the deportation of Chinese workers from a thermal power plant as a response to China's policies in Xinjiang (Birgün 2015). The composition of Turkey's ruling alliance, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and comprising various right-wing parties, appears to have curbed far-right mobilization against Chinese interests, likely due to the government's aim to attract more Chinese investments during the BRI era and its connections with businesses employing Chinese labor. However, far-right parties not in the alliance, like Ümit Özdağ's Victory Party (Zafer Partisi), known for its anti-refugee rhetoric, have criticized projects such as the BRI, viewing them as harmful to Turkish interests (Özdağ 2021). Conversely, center-left parties like the CHP and the pro-Kurdish HDP have shown support for labor protests against Chinese worker employment. Notably, some anti-Chinese labor protests have occurred in Kurdish-majority areas, where the Turkish far-right's support is notably low.

Thus, while it is possible to transform localized labor discontent against Chinese workers into broader far-right mobilization, the likelihood of such a development remains uncertain. The potential for unity between local and Chinese workers in Turkey, aiming to improve wag-

es and working conditions without resorting to divisive tactics, appears slim but is not entirely out of the question. These contrasting scenarios highlight the importance of closely monitoring class relations within Chinese-invested enterprises throughout Turkey.

Notes

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We thank the two reviewers of *Asian Perspective* for their helpful critiques and suggestions. We also thank Alphan Birelma, Eylem Taylan, and Kadir Selamet for their helpful critiques and suggestions on an earlier version of this paper. We are grateful to Hüseyin Deniz Sert for meticulously reading and correcting the manuscript and generously sharing valuable information and insights regarding labor unrest in contemporary Turkey.

1. For data on minimum wages in different regions of China, see China Briefing (2024). Data on Turkey are available from T.C. Çalışma ve Sosyal Güvenlik Bakanlığı (n.d.).

2. For information on average salary in China in 2022, see the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2023). Information on Turkey is available from *Hürriyet Daily News* (2023).

3. Silver and Karataşlı and Karataşlı et al. categorize the protesters in the third type as part of the stagnant relative surplus population. However, in our investigation, we encountered protesters from all three subcategories of surplus population: stagnant, latent, and floating. For a detailed explanation of these three subcategories of surplus population, see Marx (1990, 794–797). An investigation of these sub-categories is beyond the scope of this study.

4. We must stress that we count the cases where workers successfully unionized after a struggle. The GMİS union at Hema, one of these successful cases, later lost many of its members.

5. We thank Andrea Ghiselli and Pippa Morgan for sharing the Turkish portion of the global data they compiled. For a preliminary data analysis, see Ghiselli and Morgan (2023).

6. The Ministry's data does not include years before 2011, and extension durations of work permits of circa 700 workers are not indicated; therefore, the data we compiled represents the minimum amounts.

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