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Labour control regimes and resistance of workers: A field study on Denizli textile workers

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Abstract

Parallel to the capitalist development processes, the nature and varieties of control regimes have been changed. The control has been sometimes conducted directly, sometimes indirectly. But the common point of each control mechanism is the complexity of different practices of management and what workers do with these practices. In the first years of capitalism, labour control regimes are generally simple and direct. Together with Taylorism, it has gained technical importance and now become more hegemonic. The aim of this study is to examine the labour control regimes and resistances of workers to these regimes through a case study. For this purpose, in-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 45 workers, one factory owner, one general manager, two department managers, two chiefs, one foreman, three subcontractor workshop owners in Denizli textile. The results show that workers develop very limited resistance, and the working conditions determine the resistance strategies of workers.

Keywords: Labour control regimes, resistance of workers, Turkey.

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1. Introduction

Many developments have been experienced in labour markets from Fordism to post-Fordism with the transformation of the capital. All these developments aim to reorganise labour markets to increase labour productivity and profitability of employer. The phenomenon of the 'control' has been required to revise due to these developments. From this point of view, it is very important to understand production relations and working conditions and their control mechanisms from Fordism to post-Fordism.

Fordism is a system of mass production during the 1940s–1960s. The productivity is achieved with the help of detailed division of labour and narrowly defined routine job. Labour and machinery are connected to each other with a stable relationship. In this system, competitiveness depends on producing any product cheaper and much more (Yenturk, 1993). However, the system, based on standard consumer goods, experienced a crisis due to growing international competition, falling profit margins, inadequacy in the face of rapidly changing consumer demands, increase in stock costs, and market saturation of mass production (Taymaz, 1993, p. 11). The economic crisis has caused the revision of the capitalist system and also Fordism.

A new process called post-Fordism has begun. All production relations and working conditions have been changed. Lean production and flexible specialisation are two important systems of post-Fordism. Lean production is a customer-oriented system that is based on manufacturing without stock. Total quality management, quality circles, full-time production system and every kind of flexibilities are main components of system. With these systems, the occurrence of faulty products is prevented at the production stage, in this way efficiency and competitiveness will be provided (Bozkurt, 1996, p. 66).

The meaning and the content of 'work' have changed in the post-Fordism. For Gorz (2001, p.83), meanings of the concepts related with work such as collective, business, hours, wages, weekly, yearly have changed generally. Depending on changes in the labour market from Fordism to post-Fordism, the content and sense of control experienced many significant alterations.

In Taylor's, control is provided with the separation of small sections of production and supervision of the time and space. Machinery, assembly line, chronometer are main tools of control. In Fordism, labour is controlled by the labour process itself (Munck, 1995, p. 218). In post-Fordism period, it is very difficult to implicate them. From now on, control has been distributed to every point of production. This can only be possible by providing an internal control. Internal control can be achieved by direct control mechanisms, transferred from Fordism, and also ideological control form. Total quality management, quality circles, and every kind of flexibilities are used to control workers.

In the light of all these discussions, this study aims to reveal how the workers are controlled by the help of a sample selected from Denizli textile industry. The other aim of the study is whether the control mechanisms have really changed in practice. Other questions asked by the study are whether direct and despotic control mechanisms or ideological/hegemonic control mechanisms are applied. How do workers respond to all these mechanisms? What are the resistance strategies of workers?

2. Literature review

The control over every aspect of work is the most important priority of capital. Because for Marx, surplus is acquired from labour by paying it less than the value it adds in the labour process. Once labour is at the usage of capital, a lot of strategies may be developed for confirming that the purchase of labour power results in the achievement of productive effort (Marx, 1976, p. 1054). For this reason, in every period of capitalism, the control of labour has been the most important theme of the capitalists.

The context of management and managerial control varies with different periods of capitalism (Knights & Willmott, 1990, p. 48). So, every capitalist period can be understood with its own labour market and its control regime. Therefore, many theoreticians are making the concept of control by relating it to capitalist periods such as Braverman, Edwards and Burawoy. The intersection point of all these studies is that they accept each control regime which is the complexity of different practices of management and what workers do with these practices. Another common feature of these studies is that they generally have periodised capitalism in terms of the transition from despotic/direct to hegemonic/ideologic regimes.

In his works, Braverman focuses on monopoly capitalism and scientific management of Taylor. Braverman identifies Taylor's 'scientific management' principles with US capitalism. The principles of scientific management, namely, the task specialisation, separation of planning and execution of tasks, and relentless controls and performance management to ensure high output and quality (Dean, 2013, p. 108). In this way, knowledge and power have been dominated by management. On the other hand, in this process, workers have lost their autonomy and control on work. They have become more unskilled. Direct control has been built on the threat of coercive force, strict supervision and reduction of individual responsibility.

All these discussions are reflected, Friedman adds the concepts of responsible autonomy to the literature. 'Responsible autonomy is the management technique of allowing employees more discretion and greater variety in their work (using methods suggested by job redesign)'. In contrast, direct control is the technique of closely supervising the work of employees, who are allowed to undertake only a narrow range of tasks (using methods suggested by scientific management). Responsible autonomy is more likely to enlist commitment from employees, but does not guarantee compliance with management wishes (Heery & Moon, 2008).

Burawoy also develops concept of *consent* related to this area. With the help of this concept, he wants to expand the narrow view of the scientific method and analyse labour relations in post-Fordist period. According to Burawoy (1985, pp. 158–160), control is provided by means of creating consent instead of coercion. This situation increases the need for new consensual control mechanisms. However, Yucesan-Ozdemir (2000, p. 243) pointed out the coercion should not be understood to have disappeared in this situation. During this period, control has become much more important because of sensitive power relations.

3. Data collection and findings

3.1. Data collection

This study is a qualitative study. The aims of this study are to examine the labour control mechanism and resistances of workers to these regimes through a case study on Denizli textile workers. In line with this aim, in-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 45 workers, one factory owner, one general manager, two department managers, two chiefs, one foreman, and three subcontractor workshop owners in Denizli textile sector. The sample of the study consists of two textile factories and three workshops. The field work lasted about six months. Reason for choosing an in-depth interview technique is that resistance is a very intimate subject.

3.1.1. Findings

3.1.1.1. Demographics of respondents

Most of the interviewed workers are women (35 out of the 45 workers are female, 10 of them are male). This is because the textile sector is predominantly based on female labour. Participants are predominantly under the middle age. There are 10 workers in the age group of 19–25, 24 workers in the age group of 26–35, 8 workers in the age group of 36–45, and 2 workers in the age group of 46 and above. Regarding the educational status of workers, the following result has been obtained.

Workers generally have lower levels of education. One-third of the workers are primary school graduates. Two of them are illiterate. Eight of the workers are high school graduates. Six of the workers are middle school graduates. When workers are asked about marital status they are predominantly married. 38 workers are married, 4 are divorced and 3 are single.

Nearly all workers (38 people) are of village origin. The proportion of those who still live in the village is quite high among these people.

3.1.1.2. Control mechanisms in factories and workshops

The control in the factories is provided with technical control (cameras, card system and number system) and hierarchical control (supervision by foremen and chiefs). In hierarchical control system, general manager is in the top position and department heads govern the departments on behalf of him. Foreman and chiefs are responsible for individual supervision of the workers in the department. They are responsible to the directors of departments and they are also responsible for all things such as permission, punishment that belong to workers. Premiums, working hours, penalties are determined by pre-written rules. The job descriptions were also made rigorously.

The physical structure of the factories will also allow for the supervision of workers. All of the card systems and rooms of foreman and chief are designed to supervise workers. The factory has been laid with interior cameras. So, workers think they are constantly being watched. This structuring limits the workers' resistance potentials.

With the help of these systems, workers are controlled directly and instantly. Some of the workers stated that they can only enter toilet with card. In addition, there are no areas where workers can spend time together in the factory. Briefly, bureaucratic and technical control mechanisms are dominant in the factories.

On the other hand, in subcontractor workshops, the person who owns workshop is responsible for all tasks and workers. The owner of the workshop personally supervises the workers. He decides on the whole workflow and the subjective situations of the workers. And also, the ideological control in the workshops is more intense. Instead of written pre-set rules, workers are directly exposed through face-to-face control. Job descriptions are not specified in written rules. Workers accept the owner of workshops as sister or brother of themselves. The primary relations established with the workers also negatively affect the workers' resistance potentials. Patriarchal relations between owners of subcontractor workshop and workers limit the possibility of resistance.

3.1.1.3. Workers resistance strategies

The workers' resistance has been grouped in the study as a collective–individual and open–hidden. A pattern of resistance can be individual and hidden at the same time. It can also be in the form of another combination. Telling a lie to get permission is a kind of individual and hidden resistance. In the same way, collective discussion of the workers with the foremen is a kind of collective and open resistance.

The most striking finding of the study is that workers are reluctant to resist predominantly. Workers generally avoid collective, open and organised forms of resistance. This situation is related to both working conditions of workers and labour markets conditions in Turkey. Primarily workers, working in factories, are afraid of losing their jobs and being punished. Secondly, control mechanisms are quite strict in factories. For all that, in workshops, workers avoid resistance in the direction of their own wishes because there is a patriarchal relationship with the boss. Besides these, there is a general belief belong to all participant is that they will not be able to change their existing conditions.

It has been observed that workers never participated in formal forms of collective and open resistance such as strike, workplace boycott, collective bargaining and press release. The most fundamental cause of this situation is that none of the workers in sample are unionised. Therefore, no

forms of collective and formal resistance were found. The vast majority of these strategies are hidden and individual.

The most common resistance strategy that workers develop individually is that workers soften some rules as they want. Being silent/ghost is a common strategy. Through this strategy, workers can do their jobs without drawing attention. So, they can camouflage themselves. The other hidden and individual strategies of workers are to swear or mock their foremen and chiefs in a tone that they cannot hear. Workers believe that these strategies often prevent large explosions.

‘Making mistakes deliberately is also used as a common strategy of resistance among workers’. This strategy of resistance can be used individually or collectively. Workers say that they sometimes do mistakes deliberately.

Dilly-dallying is another common strategy between workers. By this way, shipment cannot be completed on time. Employers are forced to pay very large compensation to recipient firms. This is the biggest trump card of the workers they have. This situation also damages the authority of the chiefs.

Workers use a number of strategies related to get permission. In order to be able to get permission, sometimes they can lie in matters such as sickness and death. Forwarding news to the chief through friends, getting reports from a familiar doctor are the strategies that workers use to get permission.

Workers form resistance strategies in relation to the physical working conditions. Workers, who have to work long hours, squat when their chiefs are away. Workers can rest in this way. Resting in the toilet and dressing room is another strategy used by the workers. It is fairly normal for workers to develop such strategies in the face of intense working conditions. However, these strategies are suppressed by counter strategies such as locking these rooms, controlling toilet with card system, monitoring the workers on a continuous basis with the camera.

Workers also use individual and open resistance strategies like brawling. Especially, women workers are arguing with women chiefs.

Dilly-dallying collectively is collective and hidden resistance strategy between workers. Another collective and hidden resistance strategy is that of workers hide their friends' faults from their chief and foreman collectively. This is one of the most meaningful resistance strategies observed among workers in the research process. However, if the mistake is made openly, the workers do not protect each other.

It has also been observed that workers have developed open and collective resistance strategies. It may be in the form of collective bargaining or collective petitions. However, it has been seen that workers are hesitant to give too much collective response to issues they think might lead to dangerous consequences. An example of open and collective resistance strategies is that workers do not conform to the dress code.

4. Conclusions

This qualitative study aims to analyse control mechanisms and workers resistances to these mechanisms through the sample of textile workers in Denizli. It was possible to observe how workers develop strategies for the changing world dynamics and working conditions. The other aim of this study is to find which variables are determinants of worker resistance. The study has achieved two main results. One of them is that workers develop very limited resistance. The reasons of this situation are discussed in the work. The working conditions determine the resistance strategies of workers.

Whether workers are permanent or subcontracted directly will affect the resistance strategies of them. It has been observed that forms of informal resistance are widespread among workers who are subjected to a more intense and institutional control in the factories. The vast majority of these strategies are individual and hidden strategies. Workers who are not a member of a unionised

organisation develop more individual strategies. The weakness of solidarity among the workers also restricts their ability to act together.

Such resistance strategies among workers working in a subcontractor workshop are too few to be seen. Workers often develop strategies for physical fatigue. The work flow through the primary relationships and the numbers of workers are influential in this process. The number of workers is so small as to allow direct control. On the other hand, workers hesitate to resist their bosses whom they see as relatives. The most obvious resistance strategies at the subcontractor workshops are to discuss directly with the owner of workshops. However, these discussions are mostly reminiscent of the debate between brother and sister. The demographic situation of workers is also effect strategies they develop. Open and individual resistance strategies are most often practiced by workers who are single or married with civil servant. It can be said that workers who are stronger in terms of social capital can express their feelings and willing relatively more easily. Employment patterns of workers directly affect the resistance strategies.

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