STUDENT WORKERS AS A SOURCE OF INSTANT AND SUBMISSIVE LABOUR

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Abstract: This paper considers student employees in tourism in Antalya, Turkey. The appearance of undergraduate students in the labour market in Turkey has been an observable fact, especially since the beginning of the 2000s. One can see them in many different areas of the labour market. What matters in terms of labour demand is their student status, not their skill, experience, etc. The tourism industry is one of the economic activities in which undergraduate students are densely employed. Undergraduate students are employed informally for casual jobs by agencies functioning like employment agencies, but they are not officially employment agencies. The tourism industry in Antalya has a seasonal nature, and of course employment in this area is seasonal as well. However, in some seasons, there is an instant labour demand, and undergraduate students are viewed as a good labour supply for this demand. Currently, no scientific work has been carried out on this issue. This paper intends to present some preliminary findings on student employment.

Keywords: labour market; flexibility; instant labour demand; student labour

Introduction

As is well known, mainstream economics believes that flexible employment is the best policy option regarding labour markets. It argues that flexible labour markets function best. If there are impediments to a well-functioning labour market, when labour markets are flexible, then active labour market policies can eliminate them.

There is a vast amount of literature showing how flexible labour markets function in reality and what the results are. The truth that the literature has pointed out is that
flexibility is both a discourse and a practice for transforming labour markets and labour relations in favour of capital accumulation under the hegemony of a neoliberal accumulation regime (Pollert 1988; Curry 1993; Ercan 1997; Standing 1999).

In this context, flexibility in practice emerges as a strategy to remove and/or to weaken labour market regulations, especially labour law and other social policy interventions of state, and to undermine the ground on which trade unionism rises by means of subcontracting. In the end, it leads to informalization and insecurity in terms of the working classes. With the widening flexibility of labour markets, it has been observed that labour demand for unskilled and temporary jobs turns towards the specific features of workers such as age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and so on (Peck 1996), that is to say, most the vulnerable sectors of the working classes have been seen as an ideal source of labour for the new labour regime.

There are many works by labour scholars focusing on the spread of informalization and insecure jobs during the neoliberal era and investigating employment conditions for women workers, child labour, and illegal migrant workers. Nonetheless, there is a category missing in these labour studies: student workers. One can observe that student workers have been a permanent source of casual labour.

This paper investigates student workers and focuses specifically on undergraduate students in Turkey. The appearance of undergraduate students in the labour market in Turkey has been an observable fact, especially since the beginning of the 2000s. One can see them in many different areas of the labour market. What matters in terms of labour demand is their student status, not their skill, experience, etc. The tourism industry is one of the economic activities in which undergraduate students are densely employed. Antalya is regarded as the tourism capital of Turkey. For that reason, we carried out fieldwork in Antalya by using snowball sampling in spring 2017. We interviewed a total of 25 respondents face to face by employing a semi-structured questionnaire. One of them was the owner of an agency, five of them were the supervisors, and the rest were student workers. When we quote from the respondents below, we cite their name (of course, we use fake names for ethical reasons), job, and sex.

Undergraduate students are employed for casual jobs by agencies that function like employment agencies, but they are not officially employment agencies. The tourism industry in Antalya has a seasonal nature, and of course employment in this area is seasonal as well. However, in some seasons, there is an instant labour demand, and undergraduate students are viewed as a good labour supply for this demand. Currently, no scientific work has been carried out on this issue. This study intends to present some preliminary findings on student employment.
Tourism as One of the Leading Sectors to Integrate the Economy into Global Capitalism

As Barton argues, the working-class movement, especially the struggle for paid holidays, played a major role in the development of popular tourism (Barton 2005). However, the story of the development of the tourism industry in Turkey is quite different. This industry started to grow after the 1980s, but this was not because of the working-class movement. In Turkey, neoliberal capitalism was adopted in 1980 instead of statist capitalism to integrate the country’s economy into world capitalism. This transformation was realized by a military coup, not by the government’s decision alone. We know that the economic and political elite had decided on which sectors of the economy would be the leading ones before launching neoliberal policies. Sönmez (1986, 95) reminds us that the experts of the World Bank took part in the decision-making process and suggested that Turkey should give priority to labour-intensive areas, especially tourism, and engage in producing raw materials and semi-finished products for the world markets. As is well known, international organizations, especially the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, has had an active role in the neoliberal transformation of Turkey’s economy as a whole since the 1980s. They imposed structural adjustment policies on Turkey’s government. Having an active role in the decision-making process, the State Planning Organization and Turkish Industry and Business Association agreed with the suggestion of the World Bank that Turkey should give priority to labour-intensive areas.

The Türkiye Sanayici ve İş Adamları Derneği (Turkish Industry and Business Association) (1980) had a meeting and declared that the government should support agriculture and tourism in the neoliberal transformation of the economy. The Devlet Planlama Teşkilatı (State Planning Organization) (1981) also organized a national congress on economic issues. One of the main issues on the agenda was which sectors would lead to integration into world capitalism. One can observe that there was a consensus among the participants that Turkey should engage in labour-intensive industries such as tourism, textile, garment, agriculture and food, glass, ceramics, mining, forestry, and so on. From a Ricardian perspective of comparative advantages, it was believed that these industries would give Turkey relative superiority in international trade. It was also believed that from another angle, this would be the best strategy to absorb an abundant supply of unskilled labour.

In order to create a boom in the tourism industry, the government launched a set of policies. It made a law in 1982 to give incentives to investors such as using public land for free to build hotels, long term loans with low-interest rates, employing foreign personnel, customs duty exception, tax deduction, and so forth. In 1985 the government also officially declared that the tourism industry was included
among the sectors which had priority for the development of the country. However, one can easily notice that there is a piece missing from this puzzle. It was of course necessary for a labour pool to be available to complete the picture, but this was not actually a great concern because of structural adjustment policies. The government started to liberalize the agricultural sector, stopping agricultural subsidies and ending direct purchase policy from 1980 onwards. As a result, the share of agricultural subsidies in gross domestic product decreased from 3.3% to 0.5% (Bağımsız Sosyal Bilimciler [Independent Social Scientists] 2012, 115). This led to a dramatic decrease in agricultural growth. While the growth rate of agricultural output per annum was 3.5% between 1963 and 1977 and 2.8% between 1978 and 1979, it declined to 1.4% between 1980 and 1990 (Owen and Pamuk 1999, 250). This initiated mass migration from rural areas to urban areas; that is, this process created an extensive and easily accessible labour pool in all urban areas.

These policies created clear results in the tourism industry in the 1980s. According to the official figures, while tourism revenues were less than 300 million US dollars per annum until the 1980s (Devlet Planlama Teşkilatı 1979, 430), they reached approximately 3 billion US dollars in the late 1980s (Devlet Planlama Teşkilatı 1989, 282). Today Turkey’s tourism sector is ranked sixth in the world in terms of the number of international tourist arrivals, hosting approximately 51 million foreigners per year and 13th in terms of international tourism receipts, receiving 29.8 billion US dollars (United Nations World Tourism Organization 2020).

How Employment Chains Work

“Neoliberalism” has been used to describe the transformation of the economy as a whole and “flexibility” to describe the transformation of the labour market from the 1980s onwards. Nevertheless, neither neoliberalism nor labour market flexibility remains unchanged. The transformation of the economy in general and of the labour market is a dynamic process and still going on. That means we need new conceptions to grasp this dynamic process and to fully comprehend social facts. In this respect, if we look at the labour market in the tourism industry in general, we can argue that flexibility is a proper concept to understand the labour market and the dominant form of employment. However, if we focus on some specific types of employment in the industry, like student employment, we notice that the concept of flexibility loses its strength to explain this fact.

In Antalya, the tourism industry mainly consists of holiday tourism called 3S (sun, sea, and sand) tourism. 3S tourism has a seasonal nature, and the season starts in spring and ends at the end of autumn. Winter is usually the season of shutdown. A flexible labour regime is the dominant form of employment because of the seasonal nature of the sector (Çelik 2013; Kiril 2020). Most of the workers are sent
away during the winter except for white-collar workers. However, there have been efforts to keep the sector operating in the winter as well, especially since the beginning of the 2000s. In this context, hotels have started to host various events such as scientific organizations (such as congresses, conferences, and symposiums), meetings, fairs, festivals, exhibitions, launches, and weddings during the winter. This is called alternative tourism, but these events are held over a very short term, sometimes one to two days, sometimes in a couple of weeks. During these events, there is labour demand on a daily basis, and undergraduate students are mainly viewed as the ideal labour force. It should be pointed out that graduates and postgraduates also apply for these jobs, while they are looking for a permanent full-time job. Student workers are usually employed a couple of days before the event starts. They can even be employed as late as one day or even just an hour before. Identifying this phenomenon as an instant labour demand is more suitable than describing it as a flexible labour demand or flexible employment. By instant labour or instantaneous employment, we not only mean a different form of employment than flexible employment, but also employment that involves a deeper exploitation.

Student workers are reached via agencies, most of them İstanbul-based, but there are no official figures regarding how many agencies are operating in the sector. All we know is that there are too many small- and medium-sized agencies competing fiercely against each other in alternative tourism activities. Even if it is providing technical equipment or arranging transport facilities from the airport or bus station, these agencies engage in meeting the labour demand for alternative tourism businesses. Because the total number of agencies is unknown, the number of students working for them is also unknown. This is why we employed snowball sampling in the fieldwork.

The agencies are under the charge of İstanbul-based major firms, the supervisors are under the charge of the agencies, and the student workers are under the charge of the supervisors. This is how employment chains work in alternative tourism activities. The major firms undertake the work to organize the events, but they delegate it to the agencies. The agencies usually contact the supervisors and ask them to reach out and employ the students.

It is quite rare that we have big events, but if we have, then I go myself to do the job. However, I prefer not to do the job myself and entrust an employee whom I trust most instead. (Bahadır, agency owner, male)

When the main firm undertakes to organize an event, it delegates it to an agency by allocating a certain amount of money, and the agency passes it to a supervisor by allocating a certain amount of money as well. However, it does not matter how much money is allocated for an event, student workers are paid a fixed daily wage at the minimum level.
We must conduct the events according to the budget allocated to us by the major firms. The size of the budget depends on the events, but we always pay the same amount of money to employees, no matter what the size of the budget is. (Bahadir, agency owner, male)

As one can tell, although agencies are not officially employment agencies, they operate like employment agencies in practice. And supervisors are like gang masters. Supervisors are students too, but those who are relatively more experienced in the sector are chosen as supervisors. Supervisors basically have two main functions. First, the most important one is to find student workers. They can easily do this through their network at any time. Second, they are responsible for the direction of the student workers in the workplace.

To be a supervisor requires having experience in this kind of job. A supervisor contacts the student workers, brings them to work, tells them what to do, decides on break times, and so on. But it is not just a mechanical job, as the student workers have various personal problems to deal with.

I, as a supervisor, must deal with their problems too. I must make sure that they do not reflect their problems onto their work. (Buse, supervisor, female)

Looking behind Labour Supply and Labour Demand

Lucas and Ralston (1996, 23) conclude that “it is the students who apply for part-time jobs” in the hospitality industry. From our research findings and our observations during our fieldwork, we argue that employers doing business in alternative tourism activities especially demand student labour. The point we want to make is that an analytical perspective should focus on the reasons behind the facts. In this framework, we intend to reveal why students apply for part-time jobs in alternative tourism and why employers demand student labour. Unlike Lucas and Ralston, Barron (2007, 43) accepts that “the industry (hospitality and tourism industry) appreciates the flexibility and other benefits students bring to the workplace,” but he ignores the class-based inequalities and the hierarchical relationship between student workers and employers.

If we look at this fact from the labour supply side, then we realize that the students we interviewed come from low- or middle-income families. They were asked why they work while studying at university and what they spend the money on. They replied that they needed some extra money to survive and mostly spent it on basic needs such as rent and bills (electricity, water, and so on). They were supported partly by their families, but it was not enough to meet all living costs. Coming from similar family structures, the supervisors replied that they were
surviving on the money they got from the job. Part-time jobs in the alternative tourism business are convenient for the students because they can both attend their classes and earn some money.

The best thing about these jobs is that you do not have to continue. For example, after you work for five days, you can cut your connection with the employers. If they call you next time, you can just say “I am busy” or “I have to take my exams.” (Buse, worker, female)

When we approach, by contrast, facts from the labour demand side, we find that there are two main reasons why employers demand student labour: their physical attributes and their student status. The first is related to their age, physical appearance, body size, accent, etc. As mentioned above, the events in alternative tourism last a very short time, but workdays are long. Students are viewed as strong enough to endure the harsh working conditions during long hours because of their young age. Among the applicants, those who are good-looking and have a proper accent are chosen to please attendees during the event. We were told that some agencies have catalogues consisting of pictures of student workers and information about their physical attributes.

You must be courteous and speak properly and politely all the time. When speaking to people, you must choose your words carefully and climb down all the time. You should not get irritated. These are basic skills you should have. (Ahmet, supervisor, male)

I think physical appearance is the most important thing for the jobs I do. Employers employ student workers according to their physical appearance. They choose boys who are handsome and relatively taller and girls who are more attractive. (Ceyda, worker, female)

When you apply for a job, they take a photo of you and add it to their catalogue, including your age, weight, experience, etc. (Alper, supervisor, male)

We filled a form to apply for a job. They asked us to wear the clothes they provided and took our photos. Later on, they called us when they needed it, so I suppose physical appearance is the most important thing to be able to get these kinds of jobs. (Buket, worker, female)

The latter is related to reducing labour costs and to meeting the instantaneous demand for labour. Student workers are only paid a daily wage. Employers do not have to bear any costs other than this wage. There is a university, Akdeniz University, in Antalya. Almost all student workers working in the tourism sector
are studying at Akdeniz University. The total number of undergraduate students studying in Antalya is approximately 65,000 (Akdeniz Üniversitesi [Akdeniz University] 2019, 35). This is a very large labour pool. Among them, there are always those who are ready to work.

They (employers) prefer employing students. Why? Because they know that students are in need and endure whatever working conditions. (Anıl, supervisor, male)

It is quite easy to find student workers. There are many of them who are in need. When I need them, I just go to university, look around and easily find them. They send me text messages every day, asking me to call them for a job. (Bahadır, agency owner, male)

Most of the respondents said that they go to work two or three times a month and that they work two or five days every time. They do the same jobs regardless of the events: accompanying and guiding people while they are being transferred from the airport or bus station to the venue, welcoming people at the venue, standing at the help desk, delivering presents to people, arranging meeting rooms, and so on. These jobs do not require any specific skills, and any student worker can easily be replaced with another one. In short, student workers are cheap, docile, abundant, and instantly accessible labour sources for alternative tourism businesses.

Student workers do not have a contract of employment or any other legal protection. Nothing regarding working conditions is decided in advance; that is, student workers do not know exactly what kind of tasks they have to perform, how many hours they will work during a workday, when they can take a break, when they can have lunch, etc., before the work starts. However, student workers are obedient and consent to whatever the working conditions are because their main motivation is to earn some money. By contrast, employers’ main motivation is to carry out the business at minimum cost. They can force the student workers to work extremely long hours without paying overtime in an environment in which there is no state intervention in labour relations. They only pay the minimum daily wage. According to the findings gathered through the interviews, the number of fixed hours the students worked was not clear. The only thing which is certain is that student workers work long hours, at least 14 to 18 hours a day. There are those who said that they sometimes work 24 hours.

I usually work 15 to 16 hours a day. Our work does not end when events finish because we continue to work after events. After events, there are certainly some activities as a part of events to entertain people, and we are working during these activities. Sometimes we work 24 hours. I worked for three days once without getting any sleep. I just had breaks to take a shower. (Alper, supervisor, male)
How many hours do I work in a day? I never count it, but I remember that I had workdays starting at 6.45 a.m. and finishing at 12.30 a.m. (Emir, worker, male)

Çelik (2013, 112) found that even those in the formal sector of tourism work for 16 to 18 hours a day, too. Student workers are not treated like humans, who need to rest and eat. Like the uncertain working hours, break times and lunchtimes are not fixed either. The student workers said that there is no break or lunchtime at all.

Break! There is no such break or lunchtime in our work. When someone gets tired or hungry, one of us handles her/his task for a while. We go on in this way. (Ceyda, worker, female)

Customer Satisfaction Fetish in Labour Process

The labour relation between employers and student workers in alternative tourism activities cannot be viewed as one between equals on a legal basis. Employers generally produce empty rhetoric, which is “we are family” in the job interviews with student workers, but this does not represent reality. This can be viewed as a hegemonic strategy to control the labour process (Burawoy 1985, 125–126). As a matter of fact, employers do not sign an employment contract with student workers so that they do not have to give them extra social rights except for a fixed daily wage. As their employment is informal, student workers do not have the power to haggle over working conditions. According to official figures, the trade union density rate in Turkey is 13.84%, and it is approximately 4% in tourism (Aile, Çalışma ve Sosyal Hizmetler Bakanlığı [Ministry of Family, Work and Social Services] 2020).

Being forced to work during extremely long hours, student workers are also expected to obey the rules while working. These are unwritten but quite strict rules. This is related to competition between the employers doing business in alternative tourism.

There are too many businessmen (agency owners) around looking for a chance to gain work from the big firms. This leads to fierce competition between employers in this business. The agency owners believe that one of the most important factors to establish a good relationship with the major firms is customer satisfaction, and that the major firms intend to delegate work to those who have positive feedback from customers. In order to give the customers the greatest satisfaction, employers make student workers communicate with customers in a submissive manner. They always seek new ways to give customers more and more satisfaction. They have a fetish for customer satisfaction, so to speak. This puts too much pressure on student workers.
One day I was standing at the help desk, and it was the first time for me. The agency I was working for asked us to keep the help desk open all day and all night (I mean until morning) in case the customers needed help at any time. But there was no one to replace me for the night shift. I did it all day and had to continue working all night. Even if only one customer came to the help desk at night. I totally worked non-stop for 26 hours. (Leyla, worker, female)

Once my boss asked me to deliver a card carrying a message which was “our company says have a good night” to customer’s rooms. I delivered those cards to 750 rooms. I think that was just meaningless. (Osman, worker, male)

As women workers, we often are subject to sexual harassment. Male customers insist on taking us out at night. This is the most common one and really annoying, but we cannot complain to anyone or anywhere about it. We just say that we are not allowed to go out while working instead. (Buse, supervisor, female)

Student workers are told that they should never bother customers in any respect or at any time. They must keep their distance from customers, watch their language (also their body language) and be obedient at all times. They are even told not to have their lunch or not to drink their tea/coffee in the same places where customers may be. In short, student workers are expected to make the customers feel that they have a high status. It is believed that this is the most pleasing thing to customers than anything else. The following quotations from student workers show that a kind of caste system is dominant in the workplaces.

For example, when there are events such as conferences, symposiums, and congresses, we are available in the hall to give the microphone to audience members who want to comment. We are not allowed to sit and to hear the speakers. We must stand up during the event, but somehow we must hide from the people so as not to bother them. We must take care of the speakers and the audience, and whenever they need our help, we must immediately appear to help. (Emir, worker, male)

When the events last more than one day, we stay in the hotel where we work, but we are not allowed to appear in any common areas such as the swimming pool, restaurant, cafe, bar, and lobby after work. As workers, if we, for example, go to the bar to get a drink, the customers are thought to get angry (they do indeed) as they may see this as a threat to their high social status. (Osman, worker, male)
Conclusion

As in the advanced capitalist world, the policy of creating a flexible labour market has been adopted in Turkey as a structural part of neoliberal transformation from the 1980s onwards. Since then, there has been a deregulation process in the labour market. Although different governments came into power one after another, they continued to firmly undertake this policy. This has led to informal employment becoming more widespread. According to current official figures by the Turkish Statistical Institute, the share of informal employment in the total employment is 28.7% (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu [Turkish Statistical Institute] 2020). The vast majority of workers in informal employment consist of women, child workers, “illegal” migrants, and students. Because they do not have any social protection, informal employment has devastating effects on their lives.

This study aimed at bringing to light the working conditions of student workers. There are not previous studies on this issue. Student workers are hired by the agencies. There are too many agencies trying to win contracts from the major firms. These firms contracting agencies as supplier firms take this as an advantage to place pressure on them to reduce costs, and the agencies take abundant, obedient, and cheap student labour as a benefit to win contracts. Student workers are employed on a daily basis without having a contract of employment and forced to work extremely long hours without getting anything else apart from a daily wage. If we accept that a normal workday is eight hours, then it becomes clear that student workers should get paid twice the amount. Employers double the rate of surplus value they get by extending the workday. By and large, our preliminary findings show the super-exploitation of student workers in a working environment in which there is no state intervention or an organized labour movement.

Student workers come from relatively low-income families. They get financial support from their families while studying, but this is not enough to survive. That is why they do part-time work. They consent to whatever working conditions employers offer because they are in need. Employers take this situation as an advantage to exploit student workers. They create a work environment in which student workers are expected to be obedient and submissive all the time. These kinds of social relations in the workplace do seem to bear a similarity to the caste system.

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