

## **Weaving Our Union, Knot by Knot**

### **Turkey:**

#### **Declaration on the Launch of Ev-Ek-Sen (Union of Homebased Workers) and Call for Unity**

As women homebased workers we launched the Union of Homebased Workers (Ev-Ek-Sen) on 10<sup>TH</sup> November 2009. We have built our union on the basis of discussions we have had and needs we have specified during the organizing activities carried out in all parts of Turkey, from Urfa to Aydin, Mersin to Istanbul, from Hatay to Ankara, from Mugla to Yuksekova, from Antalya to Sivas. That is how we set our goals, how we determined the route leading to the present stage. In 2007, we built Turkey HomeNet – Solidarity Network of Women Homebased Workers in Turkey - in line with the activities carried out since 1994 aimed at winning visibility. In 2008, we decided to unionise and thus we have reached a new stage based on our initiatives to develop policies both nationally and worldwide.

Precarious work has become widespread in Turkey as in the rest of the world. We, homebased workers, are among the most invisible sections of precarious workers, so that there are even times we find it difficult to explain that we also work, that we are also workers like all other workers. It is not unusual for our own-account work to be confused with micro-entrepreneurship. We are however workers. For in most cases our own-account work is carried out side-by-side with work on order or piece-rate work (dependent on factories). When we have a stall in the market, the sale of our products is only a secondary goal; the primary goal is to receive new orders by exhibiting samples of our products and to deliver completed orders. The examples we exhibit on market stalls serve as our *curricula vitae*. Thus our activity in the marketplace is dependent work, but is easily confused with own-account or independent work. We want to make it known that we carry out dependent work, that we are workers.

In addition, since we are ‘after all’ women, there is a tendency to believe we are only finding something to do in our leisure time. However, we as homebased workers, have to work in order to survive, just like all other workers. We work in order to make a living, not as a leisure time activity. We need to eat, too. Our children also go to school as well as occasionally get sick. We also have parents. What is more, besides our homebased work we take care of the children, the sick, the old, and the disabled in the family or household.

*In the first place, our primary aim is: by launching our trade union, we want to make our work visible, to be recognized as workers. We demand rights equivalent to those of all other workers. We demand our rights arising from our homebased work.*

The first right we are entitled to as workers is the right “to establish or join organisations of our own choosing” (ILO Home Work Convention C177, 1996). In fact, we have, in different localities, a number of organisations with or without legal personality. They range from handicraft cooperatives of women homebased workers to marketing groups, from associations to work teams. What is common to them is the fact that they are all income-generating organisations. However, income-generating organisations have a limit to the growth of their membership. If the number of members grows, then the loaf of bread they share has to grow as well. Otherwise the share of each is diminished and the function of organising diverted from its original purpose. However, what we needed was another kind of organization, such that the more homebased workers unite, the more the organisation would grow and the more it would serve its purpose. Thus we needed a rights-based organisation. The trade union is our rights-based organisation.

We carry out our homebased work in three different types of employment relationships: either we are given piecework by factories or contractors, or we work on the basis of orders from individuals, or we work on our own-account. And it is not unusual for us to do all three in the same week or day of our life, for the flow of work is irregular, the income is low, and payments are unreliable. Furthermore, even when we work in only one type of relationship, such as employment by an intermediary, we may simultaneously be workers in different sectors. Now we clean the loose threads on jeans, then pack sweets, and then assemble parts to make ballpoint pens. The next day we sew shoes, put together engine components. Therefore it is impossible to pack all instances of homebased work in the bag of a single sector.

Like all workers we face occupational health risks. As a result of employment with low wages, working and living under unfavourable circumstances for long years, almost all of us suffer from occupational illnesses. We are exposed to numerous health risks. Since we work at home, unlike the case of other workers, all household members are exposed to the same risks. Besides, the variation of the types of work we carry out causes a greater degree and variety of occupational health risks. If we work both in the textile sector and paint beads, we may be simultaneously exposed to the dangers faced both by textile workers and bead-painters.

*Our second expectation of our union is this: We want to improve the conditions of our homebased work, win the rights enjoyed by formal workers, those registered for social security, for example health insurance and the right to a pension when we are too old to work. We want to work and live under better circumstances. What we want is not only work, not any work, but secure and “decent work,” to cite the ILO.*

We are organising for ‘decent work’, for social security, but by organising we are also striving to win the right to organise. We have organised and launched our union; however, the government has started a legal case to shut it down. Thus, winning recognition for our trade union Ev-Ek-Sen as a trade union will imply the recognition of the right to organise for all homebased workers and more generally for all those who work without being covered by social security. We, homebased workers, are one section of workers who lack social security coverage. Therefore the recognition of Ev-Ek-Sen will be a very important gain not only for our unionisation struggle, but also for that of all precarious workers. For the current legislation in Turkey requires workers to have a social security number; in practice, being covered by social security is a prerequisite for founding or joining a union. That in turn means a restriction of the right to unionise to workers covered by social security. Thus the basic argument of the legal case against our union is that ‘the founders are neither workers nor employers’, in spite of the fact that we are all homebased workers. And if insecure workers cannot organise in unions, if they have to face a legal case when they attempt to organise, if the recognition of their basic union rights is yet to be achieved, then it is obvious that workers with social security are also threatened and can easily be deprived of their rights. Several instances of this are already evident. One of the most important and comprehensive cases is the Social Security Act (SGK in Turkish, formerly SSGSS).

To put it briefly, if we can win the case for our right to organise, this will be a very significant gain not only for members of Ev-Ek-Sen, not only for all home-based workers whether unionised or not, but for all workers with or without social security. *For this reason, throughout the legal process we want to walk together not only with informal or precarious sections of workers, but with all women, with all workers (that is, also with those with formal protection), and with all their organisations as well.*

Universalising social inclusion is closely related to universalising the right to unionise. And the struggle for the right to unionise for all insecure workers involves, besides paying attention to the legal process, the demand for the replacement of the

current Trade Unions Act with one including all insecure workers as well. This task requires unifying the forces of all sections of the workers. A process demanding the building of solidarity awaits us. In order to guarantee the right to organise for all workers without security, we are going to struggle for a new Trade Union Act and a new labour legislation in general.

In Turkey, as in the rest of the world, women are the majority among insecure workers. And that is directly connected to our position as women within the sexist division of labour: regardless of the type of work, there is the unpaid domestic labour of all women. We women carry out domestic work such as cooking, washing the dishes, laundry etc. required by the maintenance of everyday life of the household; we undertake the care and responsibility for our children, old people, sick and disabled relatives; and we maintain the stability of social life as required by the job of the husband. Therefore women, whatever their employment status, constitute a very important group of allies for homebased workers.

Our solidarity is not limited to national boundaries. Throughout the years we have been trying to organise, as we have been weaving our union knot by knot, we have always been in solidarity with organisations of homebased workers in other countries and with the Federation of Homeworkers Worldwide (FHWW), our international organisation. They have brought their strength and craft to our struggle and vice versa. We have also experienced the significance of international solidarity through other cases. The Novamed case in Antalya Free Zone in southwest Anatolia and more recently the DESA case exemplify international solidarity as well as how inseparably interwoven are the women's movement and the labour movement.

We also have connections and solidarity with organisations of workers without security, which we shall develop and strengthen. If we have in common that we are being exploited as labourers; if the conditions leading to the exploitation of our labour are also common; then we have a common struggle.

Let us unite our forces for the universalisation of social security, for the organising of workers without security in rights-based organisations of their own choice, for the change of the applicable law in Turkey and the abolition of the current Social Security Act!

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