

Processes of Wage Theft

The Neoliberal Labor Market and Syrian Refugees in Turkey

Danièle Bélanger and Cenk Saraçoğlu

The unprecedented influx of Syrian refugees into Turkey since the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011 has made this country home to the largest number of refugees worldwide. As of 2021, the number of registered Syrian refugees in Turkey reached 3.7 million (UNHCR 2021). The Turkish government, which does not grant official refugee status to war-displaced people from the Middle East, implemented the Foreigners and International Protection Law in April 2013.¹ Based on Article 91 of this law, the Turkish government issued a temporary protection regulation in 2014 that applied specifically to the conditions of Syrians who were designated to be in mass influx seeking immediate protection. This new regulation granted Syrian refugees access to services, including public education and healthcare. With return prospects diminishing after 2011, Syrians, who have been dispersed across various towns and cities, had to build a sustainable life in Turkey and, hence, had to participate in the labor market to generate income. Under these circumstances, an additional decree took effect in January 2016 that provided Syrians with the right to obtain a work permit. According to this decree, a registered Syrian refugee can obtain a work permit only in the province of registration (TEPAV 2018). Moreover, the number of employed Syrians in a workplace cannot exceed 10 percent of the total number of Turkish citizens at that workplace. As such, due to structural obstacles to formal employment, including strict rules, cumbersome and costly bureaucratic

procedures, and language barriers, a very small percentage of employed Syrians were able to regularize their situation (Del Carpio, Şeker, and Yener 2018). As of the end of 2018, only 28,000 Syrians had work permits, which meant that most of them were employed informally without authorization.²

While a small segment of Syrians with sufficient capital set up businesses and became entrepreneurs, the majority of them, without capital and language barriers, had no choice but to sell their labor power on the informal labor market under precarious conditions in low-wage jobs in the textile, construction, agriculture, and food service sectors. It is estimated, as of 2018, that approximately 650,000 Syrians work informally (Erdoğan 2018: 844; Erol et al. 2017). In this context, the Syrian refugee issue in Turkey can no longer be circumscribed to a legal relationship between the state and asylum seekers. Syrians in Turkey need to be treated not only as refugees but also as displaced migrant workers engaging in specific social relations with business and capital owners on the one hand and Turkish workers on the other.

The focus of recent academic studies has shifted from discussing Syrians' precarious legal status and limited rights to empirically documenting aspects of their lives, including labor processes (Bélanger and Saraçoğlu 2018; Canefe 2016; Daniş 2016; Erol et al. 2017; Lordoğlu and Aslan 2016). By focusing on various sectors of the labor market where informal employment is prevalent for both local Turkish workers and Syrian refugees, these studies document how Turkish business and capital owners impose lower wages, longer working hours, greater control, and less secure conditions on the Syrian refugees compared to the Turkish laborers working under similar exploitative conditions in the same sector. These studies also suggest that, relative to other workers, Syrians are more likely to be the target of workplace abuses, including wage theft, sexual harassment, and physical violence.

The status of Syrians as non-citizen war exiles enables capital and business owners to impose such severe conditions on Syrians. The need to generate income forces Syrians to take on work under terrible conditions. Lack of monitoring, the indifference of state authorities toward workplace abuses, and the absence of support from Turkish workers who are also vulnerable in the context of the economic crisis contributed to Syrian workers' extreme precarity. Turkish capital owners are able to avoid legal and social safeguards and continue exploiting Syrian workers. In this respect, Syrian laborers fulfill a function for Turkish capital similar to that of temporary migrant workers and undocumented migrants employed in advanced capitalist countries and the Gulf region where the capital bypasses the domestic labor codes and regulations to exploit workers and accumulate capital (Hanieh 2015; Anderson 2010).³

As such, the conditions of the Syrian refugees in labor processes need to be situated within the context of their relations with capital owners, the state, and other workers. This vantage point opens new avenues to unravel

the situation of Syrian refugees in Turkey. This research aims to further document these relationships by focusing on practices of wage theft or unpaid salaries that Syrian refugees commonly experience. Wage theft is by no means unique to Syrian refugees in Turkey, but Syrians are much more vulnerable to capital owners' utilization of it when they bypass social and legal limits to labor exploitation. An analysis of wage theft processes furthers the understanding of how the temporary protection regime equips the Turkish capital with more capacity to overcome domestic legal and social limits to exploitation and capital accumulation. In these very difficult conditions, some Syrians, however, deploy strategies to mitigate their precarious situation, albeit with very limited success. This analysis builds on fieldwork we carried out in Izmir between 2016 and 2018, which includes in-depth interviews with Turkish workers, business owners, and Syrian workers employed in different labor-intensive sectors.

Wage Theft: Definition and Cases

Wage theft falls under the broader practices of wage-related violations.⁴ Because of its prevalence in certain jobs in both formal and informal sectors, it is often studied as a key indicator of labor standard violations and a severe form of labor exploitation. Wage theft is defined as the partial payment or nonpayment of wages that should have been paid to a worker for work already performed. Moreover, wage theft occurs when a standard wage (such as minimum wage) or the wage agreed to by an employer and a worker is not paid in its entirety in due time (i.e., weekly, bimonthly, or monthly). Other examples of wage theft include the following: mandatory unpaid probation or training periods, theft of tips, denial of rest or meal times, mandatory safety deposits (for instance, to prevent job desertion), mandatory unpaid or underpaid overtime work, unfair salary deductions (for example, fees for labor brokers or washroom use), and deduction or withholding of a portion of wages ("mandatory savings") to be paid (theoretically) only upon termination of employment (Dasse 2012; Taykhman 2016). In some contexts, employees who are victims of wage theft may seek redress, but often employers will hide assets in order to prevent employees who win their case in court from collecting judgments. Worldwide, numerous forms of wage theft are widespread and amount to very large unpaid sums. These violations entail very negative consequences for workers and their families.

An extensive body of research documents the endemic character of various forms of wage theft practices, particularly in low-wage jobs. In the United States, for example, a number of surveys done in large metropolitan areas, including Los Angeles (Milkman, González, and Narro 2010), Austin (Galvin 2016), and New York (Dasse 2012), provide evidence of sys-

temic practices of wage theft toward workers in construction, hospitality, agriculture, and service sectors where monitoring is considered difficult to enforce (Fussell 2011). Studies on construction workers in countries such as Germany (Gibney 2000), Dubai (Buckley 2013), and Singapore (Charanpal 2015), for example, indicate systemic wage theft in this sector.

While widespread in all forms of employment, the occurrence of wage theft is higher, however, in the informal sector, the largest employment sector worldwide. Migrants with precarious status, including documented temporary migrants and migrants in irregular situations, are more likely to experience wage-related violations than others. According to research on the United States, undocumented Latino workers are particularly at risk of experiencing wage theft (Fussell 2011). Quantitative estimates based on survey data indicate that, nationally, nearly 50 percent of day laborers (many of whom are undocumented) reported at least one instance of underpayment of wages (Theodore, Valenzuela, and Meléndez 2009). Studies in the United States also indicate that gender matters: women are more likely to experience wage theft than men whether or not they are documented, American-born, Black, or working in specific sectors (Petrescu-Prahova and Spiller 2016).

Mechanisms for seeking redress exist, particularly for workers in the formal sector who are covered by labor codes and laws. Among precarious migrants, including those without a work and/or residence authorization, reporting wage theft is generally extremely difficult due to fear of retaliation from the employer. Being fired, reported to authorities, or illicitly detained are among common fears experienced by workers suffering wage theft. For undocumented migrants or migrants with precarious status, fear of deportation stands as the most critical concern: complaints or wage claims to the employer or a third party are nearly impossible when the migrant is deportable due to the unauthorized residence and/or employment.

In the case studied in this analysis, Syrians in Turkey have the authorization to reside in Turkey, but most do not have a work permit and, therefore, work informally. As non-citizens, their employment is unlawful, and thus they may suffer sanctions, including being caught by police and, in some cases, being deported. Despite such constraining environments, precarious workers who suffer from wage theft may deploy various strategies to mitigate their situations. For example, construction workers from South and Southeast Asia in Singapore who frequently experience deportation threats and physical and verbal intimidation use tactical accommodations when confronted with wage-related violations in order to obtain favors, including more hours of work or better jobs (Charanpal 2015). In Canada, temporary agricultural workers who suffer wage-related violations (not being paid hourly as they should be, for instance) may adopt compliant behavior to secure their jobs for the following agricultural season (Basok, Bélanger, and Rivas 2014).

In sum, the existing research on wage theft captures the contradiction between economic inclusion through employment and exclusion and marginalization due to the extreme forms of abuse these workers are subjected to, along with the very few avenues they have for claiming their rights and seeking redress (Sung et al. 2013). The study of experiences of wage theft among Syrian workers in Turkey contributes to understanding the stronghold capital and business owners have on them as well as the contradictory position workers find themselves in as legal residents but unauthorized workers.

Syrian Refugee Workers in Izmir, Turkey

This analysis is part of a larger project on relations within the Turkish society, including employers, citizens, nongovernmental organizations, and Syrian refugees. A total of ten field visits were conducted in Izmir in 2016, 2017, and 2018, as well as one in Gaziantep and Antakya in 2016. The first part of the project, based on seventy-eight interviews with municipality officials, NGO employees, business owners, and workers, focused on the governance of Syrian refugees and the relationships among these actors (Bélanger and Saraçoğlu 2018), the social construction of Syrian refugees among various groups in Turkish society (Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2019b), and the political construction of the Syrian refugee crisis in Turkey (Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2019a).

In 2018, we conducted in-depth interviews in Izmir, Turkey, with thirty Syrian refugees who had migrated to Turkey seeking refuge from the war that began in 2011 and were registered with state authorities under the Temporary Protection Regime. The first fifteen interviews were conducted on the premises of a nongovernmental organization that provides services to Syrians in Izmir. Our interviewees lived in the neighborhood when they first arrived in Izmir, and while some had moved, others were still living there. Some interviewees still used the services of this organization, particularly its Turkish language classes. The association introduced us to potential participants according to the criteria we provided, including gender, age, and work situation. The interview guidelines of the first fieldwork explored the participants' circumstances of leaving Syria, their trajectories, and their life and work experiences in Turkey. The second set of fifteen interviews were conducted with Syrians in a location of their choice, their home, or a public place (café, restaurant). For this group, the interview was more focused on insertion into the labor market, employment experiences, and working conditions. We asked questions about each employer as well the employment situation and history of family members, including children, spouses, and other cohabiting relatives. A few also provided information about close

friends. All interviews were fully transcribed and translated to English by a native Arabic-speaking professional translator. Both authors of this chapter were present for all interviews. In total, we interviewed eleven men and nineteen women: nine were unemployed, one was working as a volunteer in a school, and the others were employed, full-time or part-time.

The theme of wage theft was not anticipated prior to the research, but it emerged as a very systematic experience of workers in low-wage jobs and loomed large in participants' narratives about their experiences in Turkey. This chapter primarily relies on the second set of interviews but is also informed by the first set, as well as all other interviews conducted as part of this project, including interviews with employers and NGO workers.

Making a Living in Izmir

Our sample of thirty interviewees indicates three subgroups with respect to work and income. The first group included families with unemployed parents (one in the case of single-parent families), who relied on their children's labor and, in some instances, received supplementary income from allowances donated by organizations, like the Red Cross and NGOs, on the basis of certain eligibility criteria. A strategy we noted in some families was to have some children in the home working to allow other children to remain in school. The second group was composed of families with at least one parent working for low wages in a labor-intensive sector. In these families, there were different configurations: both spouses may be employed, or one or more children may also be working. In the third group, we have a subset of families with one adult income earner holding a professional job. Most of these interviewees worked as teachers in temporary education centers and did not experience wage theft. Some of them, however, only worked a few hours a week, which resulted in a low but reliable income. Apart from the teachers, all others worked informally and only had a verbal agreement with their employer; among them, as we will see, wage theft was a very common experience.

Individual average monthly income among the eighteen interviewees who were employed was 1,500 Turkish liras (US\$258). The household income of our interviewees varied between 1,700 and 4,800 Turkish liras per month, with an average of 2,600 Turkish liras (US\$473/month). Average household size was 5.3 persons; thus, the average monthly available income per household member was 502 liras (US\$89). These incomes are significantly below the legal minimum wage of US\$418 per month and the national average household income per capita, which was US\$3,604 in 2017. The poverty line set by the Turkish government for 2017 was 5,000 Turkish liras (US\$861) per month for a family of four. The average household in-

come of the Syrian families we interviewed was more than half below this threshold, and the average household size was above four.

Among the participants occupying low-wage jobs for whom we have detailed employment histories, fourteen reported an incidence of wage theft that happened to them or to a close family member (a few mentioned incidents that happened to a close friend). In total, the narratives provide information for twenty-six workers (participants and people close to them) who were subject to wage theft at least once, for a total of thirty-four cases/instances perpetrated by thirty-four different employers (some workers experienced it with more than one employer). Some interviewees did not elaborate on the work-related violations they suffered, so we underestimate the prevalence of wage theft among our interviewees and their family members. Nonetheless, stories of wage theft were recurrent and similar across interviewees in labor-intensive sectors, pointing to an existing pattern.

The most common types of wage theft occurred when workers' wages went unpaid, were delayed, and/or were only partially paid. For example, in some cases, employers told workers that a portion of their salary would be retained until the end of their employment. The following section of this chapter discusses the relationships that unfolded in instances of wage-related violations between employers, Syrian workers, Turkish workers, and state authorities. Unbalanced power relations are central to the dynamics that unfolded, due to workers' fear of being denied overdue wages, fired, reported to authorities (because of unauthorized employment), detained, or deported. The analysis shows how, among our study participants, the Syrian informal workforce in working-class jobs is used as a disposable workforce and, thus, experiences very severe forms of exploitation.

Processes of Wage Theft in Izmir

Processes and consequences of wage theft capture the extreme precarity of Syrian workers in low-wage jobs in the Turkish labor market. As non-citizens without authorization to work, they live in a liminal situation that exposes them to various forms of labor exploitation. We provide cases from our interviewees to illustrate the extent of the power imbalance and the consequences on workers and their families. In some cases, however, interviewees made attempts to seek redress when suffering from wage theft, but given their lack of access to legal recourse, their only option was to negotiate directly with their employer. As we documented elsewhere (Bélanger and Saraçoğlu 2018), NGOs are very careful in assisting workers in seeking redress because they fear exposing them as unauthorized workers. We interviewed NGO workers who instead focused on encouraging employers to obtain work permits for their Syrian workers. None of the Syrians we

interviewed contacted nongovernmental organizations when experiencing work-related violations. As nonauthorized workers, they have absolutely no ability to claim workers' rights to state authorities.

As in many other countries, skilled workers also suffered from low wages because they could not obtain recognition for their skills. As unauthorized workers, they were, in addition, subject to frequent wage theft. Ibrahim was a professional truck driver in Syria and drove internationally to all neighboring countries, using an international driver's license he had obtained legally in Syria. He earned a good salary and enjoyed good working conditions. After he arrived in Turkey, he could not get a Turkish driving license, and his international one was not recognized by his employer.

Ibrahim: They think that my driver's license from Syria is fake, so I have to bring them very old evidence to tell them that I am a driver with experience. I tell them to test me, but they don't believe me. They think that maybe I made fake documents. If someday they believe that my documents are authentic then they would give me the license for free. But they don't believe me because I am not a Turkish citizen.

In this case, Ibrahim is forced into a deskilling process whereby he is employed for other manual jobs requiring no professional skills and is frequently subject to wage-related violations. As many others, he felt powerless because he could not complain about this situation to anyone. This situation was felt by Ibrahim as a crisis of identity and masculinity because he could not adequately provide for his family. His wife expressed a desire to work, but Ibrahim refused, stating that he has to solve this license issue first and that his family would be fine afterward.

Interviewer: When you weren't getting paid in Mersin did you think of going to a police station and filing a complaint or lawsuit against them?

Ibrahim: No, it didn't cross my mind, and the trip would have been a waste anyways because they would have asked me for proof. Where is my proof? Where would I get any evidence from? There is no proof that my boss is not giving me any money. There are four employers here that scammed me. I was robbed of 5,000 liras. One of them took 1,200 from me, another took 1,100, and another took 700. The total is about 5,000, and no one paid me back that money. I went to one of them and told him that if he doesn't pay me the money then I would spill his oil. He told me to just go and there's nothing he could do. God will pay me back.

In his case, he even moved from Mersin to Izmir, hoping to find better working conditions, but he continued to face the same problems. Cases of internal migration within Turkey for finding better employment (in this case any employment, but with an employer that honors the verbal contract) was common among our study participants.

Bassam, who worked as a pastry cook and baker in Syria, found work in an ironing business where he was not paid at all during six months of work; the boss told him every time he did not have money and that he would pay him the following month. He then left for another employer, but the new boss underpays him, pays him late, and intimidates and threatens him.

Bassam: I worked there for a while [six months without pay] and then I went around a few places until I found a place where they offered 400 liras for the same job [ironing]. But they treat me really poorly. They don't pay you what you deserve; they don't give me the money. Yesterday, I worked till 18:30 and I wanted to go home, but they wouldn't let me; they told me that if I went home then I shouldn't come back. "Go home but don't return." This happens every day.

Heba (his wife): And he can't quit and find another job because they owe him money.

Interviewer: How much does he owe you?

Bassam: About 1,800 or 1,700.

Every payday, Bassam only receives about half of the promised income (200 liras instead of 400 (US\$33 instead of US\$66), and he is not paid for the overtime he is forced to do on a daily basis. His situation is akin to forced labor in a situation of servitude. His wife Heba explains:

Heba: Working late is fine, but they don't pay them for it. They were supposed to pay him 400 liras on Saturday, but they only give him 200, and because they owe you money, they guarantee that you will come back. But they never give the money. Every Saturday we pray for them to give the money, but they never do. Everyone in the family is constantly praying to God, so he will be paid his salary.

Facing a very low and unpredictable income, Heba explains how she struggles with landlords to pay rent. The family wanted to move to another place because they could no longer afford their rent. After she found the place and agreed on the rent, the new landlord increased the rent before they moved in. This situation was experienced by other participants as well.

Heba: When I went to pay the deposit before we moved, they said that we needed to sign a contract, and I saw that rent was 460. I told him that we want to move because we thought the rent was supposed to be 380, but he just said that it just increased. We told him that we couldn't pay that amount, so he reduced it to 440, but I told him that it's still too much. I asked him to reduce it to 400, but he refused ... and then he agreed to 425, but that he would increase the rent by 50 liras every year. And then he told us to register the electricity meter in our name and pay 300. We told him that we couldn't do

that, but he told us to come back next month when we can pay the rent and take care of the electricity. He tricked us and lied to us.

Teenage workers are particularly at risk for wage-related violations. When Mahmud was fifteen, he and his brothers could no longer go to school after they sought refuge in Turkey, and they worked in various small garment shops to support their family. They earned extremely low incomes (about US\$30/week, so four to five times below Turkey's minimum wage), but these very regularly went unpaid or were partially paid. When workers complained, the boss fired them; in one instance, one boss just left the premises and "shut down" the shop.

Some employers hire Syrian labor as a "family." We had instances of these practices in two sectors: agriculture and retail. In one case, Nooran, her husband, and their seven children worked in agriculture in the region of Torbali. They lived in tents alongside other Syrian families, had no access to showers, and received meager rations of cold food while they worked peeling, coring, and removing the pith of large quantities of oranges all day. Every month, their employer promised to pay them the following month. After six months of full-time work without pay, they had to run away because the husband was severely ill. They never received compensation for their forced labor.

Rahima's family worked in a store where wages were arbitrary and not paid regularly. The boss frequently complained they were not doing enough "as a family." After her son did not receive his wages, Rahima decided the whole family would leave the employer. She then found another job, offered by her landlord, but she found herself in another exploitative relationship.

Her case was similar to others because her employer was also her landlord.⁵ In these cases, landlords directly retained wages in lieu of rent payment, although this arrangement was never discussed prior to the beginning of employment. Rahima was offered a job in her landlord's restaurant. After she began working, the owner withheld her salary, saying it was for rent and electricity. This dual dependence made her family particularly vulnerable to eviction and extreme poverty.

These examples illustrate that wage theft processes generally entailed nonpayment, partial payment, and late payment of wages, often combined with other dependencies, like access to housing, food, etc. In fact, verbal agreements rarely had any value, and only after some weeks of work could workers really know their employer's intentions. So much uncertainty resulted in very unpredictable incomes, and this had repercussions in all spheres of their lives. Women talked about the difficulty in providing adequate clothes and school material for their children, who then easily became the target of schoolyard bullies. The urgent need to find cheaper housing was also common for participants who could not secure a minimal steady

income. As indicated above, some families migrated within Turkey, seeking less exploitative relationships. Nonetheless, despite bleak prospects for fair treatment, some workers, as we will see, actively sought to improve their situation, but any improvement did not come from solidarity with Turkish workers, who were themselves feeling precarious and/or threatened by the presence of Syrian workers.

Relationships with Turkish Workers

Most Syrians work alongside Turkish workers for the same employers. In some cases, the Turkish workers were also employed informally, and in others they had lawful contracts and other benefits. Hozan, for example, is the only Syrian worker in his workplace and suffers from partially paid wages from his employer of two years. His employer owes him more than 4,000 liras, which he will forfeit if he leaves his job. When asked about whether he receives support from Turkish workers, he says it is impossible since their communication is minimal.

In all cases, Syrians report knowing that they earned less than their Turkish counterparts doing the same job. When asked about forms of solidarity among them, Syrians report having cordial relationships, but, when problems arise, Turkish workers do not support or stand up for them.

Interviewer: How much do the Turkish workers earn?

Hozan: Honestly, they earn 150 liras more per day, and I work more hours than they do. The boss does this because we're Syrian.

Interviewer: Do you talk with the Turkish workers about this? Do you ask them to stand by your side?

Hozan: No one is standing by our side because we're Syrian.

In some larger workplaces with more employees, workers do not share the same socializing spaces. This spatial division maintained segregation and prevented the development of solidarity. In these cases, differences along national lines were reinforced, and communication was kept to a minimum. In one workplace, Syrian and Turkish workers did not eat their meals in the same place.

Muhammed: The Syrians would drink tea together. When it came to food, Turkish workers had this special restaurant for them while we ate in the warehouse.

As indicated in our previous fieldwork (Bélanger and Saraçoğlu 2018), precarious Turkish workers employed informally feared being displaced

by Syrian workers; hence, it was difficult to develop bonds of solidarity with them. Employers' differential treatment and special workplace arrangements further entrench divisions among workers. While both groups are marginalized in the Turkish labor market, employment practices and frequent negative discourse about Syrians from some employers together create a climate of divisive politics hampering collective claims for better working conditions. More politically engaged ethnic Kurdish and Turkish workers expressed empathy for Syrians, but, at the same time, they were so preoccupied with their own precarity and downward socioeconomic mobility, given the economic crisis, that it was difficult for them to overcome fear of displacement, which was, to some extent, already taking place in some workplaces (Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2019b).

Workers' Strategies vis-à-vis Wage Theft

When confronting wage theft and other labor rights violations, workers deployed various strategies to mitigate the situation. An immediate change of employer was possible when workers had another job opening immediately. Some left their employer without another job because their family had more than one worker and they could survive through a period of unemployment.

Leila for instance, tells the story of how her husband was not paid after his first month of work. He changed jobs immediately.

Leila: He was supposed to be paid a monthly salary, but he didn't get a salary the first month, so he quit and found another job. His first boss didn't pay him what he earned. But then he gave him 100 every once in a while, but he didn't get all of it. Over here if you don't manage to get your first payment at the end of the month then it is lost forever.

Some workers shared stories of attempts to report wage theft to the police, but all were told that they could not file a complaint of this type. For instance, Amira, whose husband was not paid at all for an entire month, explains why it was useless to go to the police.

Interviewer: Have you thought of going to the police?

Amira: No, we didn't.

Interviewer: Do you think that going to the police would have helped you?

Amira: My cousin, who's in Germany now, was living here with four children and worked as a tailor, and my other uncle lived with them as well, so they were five people in the house.

Interviewer: Your uncle?

Amira: Yes. They weren't paid their salaries for three months. He went to file a complaint at the police station, but they told him that he's a refugee and has no right to complain. This is why they went to Germany—illegally.

For Heba, not being able to complain stripped her of her agency and the ability to exert power over her life and destiny.

Heba: If you go file a complaint, they will tell you that no one owes you anything, and you have no right to anything. If I try to take matters into my own hands then they will put me in jail.

Mothers with working children sometimes claimed their children's salaries. When her son, Asser, was not paid for his work, Rahima contacted his employer.

Rahima: I went and spoke to Asser's boss and told him that he owed my son 300 liras, and I asked him why he wasn't paying him. He told me that he does give him money, but he saw that I am just an old concerned mother, so he told me that he only had 50 liras on him at that moment, so I asked him when he would pay us the rest, and he started saying to come back next week, but I said no. I said that I don't have time to come back here all the time, so I asked him to give me the money right now or in two weeks. I took some of the rest, but there was still 50 liras left. But at least I was able to get 250 liras. I went to his workplace in Çankaya twice as well, and I managed to get 200 liras, but they still owed him some money. I am glad that he's going to school now though, I'm just annoyed at what happened. Sometimes I consider immigrating somewhere else for their sake. For their future. I am learning English.

In workplaces where many Syrians worked together and the work required skills and experience to meet tight factory orders, Syrians had more ability to claim unpaid wages without fear of immediate retaliation. For example, Muhammed worked for some time at a factory assembling lamps where nearly twenty Syrians were employed. The boss very frequently withheld wages on payday. Whenever this happened, Syrians held a spontaneous strike to claim their salary.

Muhammed: We did get a salary, but they constantly were late in giving them out. It was a monthly salary, and it was always late, so we, as Syrian workers, would go on strike because we wanted to know why it was late as the new month would begin. We held a strike against the owner asking him why he wouldn't give us our salaries. We formed a strike on the fifth of the month, and they would be as late as fifteen days into the next month even after the strike where we would ask "Where are our salaries? We need our salaries!" and so on.

Interviewer: A strike?

Muhammed: A strike where we would stop working because our salaries were late. Our boss was very difficult to deal with, and he was really mean. We

had to work for ten hours at a really high speed and productivity rate, and we never slacked. Work was going well, and we were hard workers and never slacked off, but then they would be late in giving out our salaries and cause these issues.

Despite the success of their protests, Syrian workers in this workplace still feared sabotage and arbitrary dismissal.

Muhammed: It's not that he didn't like Syrians; it's just that if there was one bad Syrian, like if someone went and told him that one of the Syrian workers is bad, then he would just fire them without really knowing what happened. That's what he was like; everything was just according to his mood. There was no justice.

In response to wage theft and other work-related abuses, workers disciplined themselves to accept the situation to avoid problems. Many talked about not going out, avoiding public places, keeping a low profile, and self-excluding themselves socially, always fearful of exposing themselves to situations that could further harm them and their families. All interviewees had internalized the fact that they had no rights in Turkey; they could only survive and wait.

Interviewer: When you were treated poorly by those Turkish workers did you discuss it among yourselves as Syrian workers?

Roshan: Yes.

Interviewer: What did you tell each other?

Roshan: We told each other that we had to stay strong because we were in a foreign country and that we should be patient. This country welcomed us; there was nothing we could do. We had to just be patient, and life gets hard sometimes. *Hamdulillah* [all praise is due to God alone] that we have each other, but we just have to put up with it so that we can survive.

Leila: The problem is that we are Syrian. He did think about doing this [complaining to the police due to unpaid wages], but we are Syrian and we want to do things, but we get scared; there is no one on our side

Amira explains:

Interviewer: Do you have any experience dealing with the police? Or your husband?

Amira: No. We never faced any issues. We just go from work to home, so we don't cause any problems with anyone. Same thing with the kids; they just go to school and come home; I don't let them go out.

In sum, strategies to claim wage theft were few, and most workers expressed fear of drastic consequences if they dared complain. Because they

have absolutely no state protection as unauthorized workers, the only successes came when confrontations with employers resulted in better pay (closer to the agreed-upon salary) or more timely pay (closer to the agreed-upon payment schedule). Our cases indicate that the size of the business, the number of Syrian workers employed by one employer, the employer's ability to quickly replace the labor force (more difficult when workers require training, for instance, and the employer has tight production deadlines), and workers' willingness to take risks when claiming their rights together shape strategies and outcomes. Study participants who feel they have no choice but to accept the social exclusion their marginalization entails mention factors, such as developing self-discipline, possessing self-control, and adopting attitudes that are compliant, submissive, and obedient, as being important. Most had internalized their inferior status in Turkish society and even felt thankful to the Turkish government for giving them asylum and legal authorization to reside in Turkey.

Conclusion

Wage theft is a worldwide phenomenon. It epitomizes the exploitation of workers in an extreme form, leading to situations of servitude and forced labor in some instances. Workers with precarious status and limited or no access to labor rights are particularly at risk of experiencing wage theft, since capital and business owners enjoy impunity when dealing with these groups of denizens—people settled in a country who lack citizenship. In the era of global neoliberalism and global labor markets, labor circulates, and employers can hire workers with various residence statuses and national origins. As such, early capitalist forms of exploitation persist with the granting of precarious legal statuses to foreign labor or with the massive employment of undocumented residents (as in the case of the United States). Both groups become structurally incorporated in labor markets and provide new opportunities of expansion and accumulation to capital owners.

In Turkey, as elsewhere, capital and business owners employ precarious workers—in this case, Syrians who are employed informally without authorization to work. Because these workers are not protected by labor codes and are subject to social marginalization, employers can assertively and openly subordinate and exploit them. In this respect, the presence of Syrian refugees enables the Turkish capital owners to surpass some social and legal limits of labor exploitation in Turkey. Hence, Syrian refugee workers in Turkey are comparable to temporary migrant workers in some other countries where the domestic limits to capital accumulation are bypassed through the import of foreign workers with no citizenship rights. In this case, the fate of Syrians in Turkey relies largely on capital and business owners rather than on state

institutions who fail to pay attention to work-related violations, including wage theft. Syrians' position in the Turkish labor market must, therefore, be examined from the point of view of employment relationships, the most critical determinant of well-being for Syrians who have practically no other safety net when it comes to survival. The paradox of economic integration and social marginalization already noted for undocumented labor is powerfully illustrated with the case of Syrians informally employed in Turkey. As put by Rajaram (2015), integration takes place through marginalization.

The consequences of systemic processes of wage theft, as Syrians we interviewed experienced, are numerous and tragic. Not being able to provide for one's necessities and being stripped of one's dignity as a worker and resident of Turkey together entail a cascade of negative effects, not only for Syrian families and communities but for Turkish society as a whole. Moreover, more detailed analyses need to be done to document inequalities among Syrians in the labor market, including factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, religion, class, place of origin, and place of residence in Turkey.

Danièle Bélanger is professor of geography at the Université Laval in Québec City and the holder of the Senior Canada Research Chair in Global Migration Processes. Between 1997 and 2013, she was professor of sociology at Western University, London, Ontario, Canada. Her research analyzes the relationships between policies and precarious migration status. Her projects have focused on temporary migrant workers, trafficked individuals, undocumented migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and marriage migrants. She conducts fieldwork in Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Canada. Some of her recent migration research has been published in *The Annals of Social and Political Science*, *Current Sociology*, *Asian Population Studies*, *Asia Pacific Migration Journal*, and *Pacific Affairs*.

Cenk Saraçoğlu is a faculty member in the Faculty of Communication at Ankara University, Turkey. He received his undergraduate diploma from Bilkent University, International Relations Department, and earned his MA and his PhD degree in sociology from the University of Western Ontario, Canada, in 2008. He is interested in migration, nationalism, urban transformation, and ethnic relations, with a particular focus on Turkey. He is the author of the book *Kurds of Modern Turkey: Migration, Neoliberalism and Exclusion* (I. B. Tauris: 2008) and published several articles on Turkish society and politics in scholarly journals.

Notes

1. Turkey ratified the Geneva Convention and the 1961 protocol so that refugee status would be applied to European applicants only.
2. This information was revealed in December 2018 by Onursal Adıgüzel, a Turkish MP from the opposition Republican People's Party, in a press briefing. Retrieved 1 April 2019 from <https://t24.com.tr/haber/chpli-adiguzel-son-uc-yilda-28-bin-suriyeli-calisma-izni-aldi,773713>.
3. Elsewhere, we carried out a discussion comparing the conditions of Syrian refugees in Turkey and temporary labor migrants, especially in Gulf countries, around the concept of spatial fix (Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2019c).
4. According to the International Labor Organisation 1949 Protection of Wages Convention (no. 95), which came into effect in 1952, wages are defined as “remuneration or earnings, however designated or calculated, capable of being expressed in terms of money and fixed by mutual agreement or by national laws or regulations, which are payable in virtue of a written or unwritten contract of employment by an employer to an employed person for work done or to be done or for services rendered or to be rendered” (Article 1, ILO: https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:11300:0::NO:11300:P11300_INSTRUMENT_ID:312240). Turkey ratified this convention in 1961. It is still currently in force. According to Article 2.1, the convention “applies to all persons to whom wages are paid or payable.” The ILO recommends applying the standards of this convention to all workers, including those in irregular situations (https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/--europe/--ro-geneva/--ilo-brussels/documents/genericdocument/wcms_177275.pdf).
5. Families we interviewed rented very low-end housing in poor neighbourhoods. Many spoke of unsafe, insalubrious, and promiscuous living conditions. Most paid between 380 and 500 liras per month for housing.

References

- Anderson, Bridget. 2010. “Migration, Immigration Controls and the Fashioning of Precarious Workers.” *Work, Employment and Society* 24(2): 300–317.
- Basok, Tanya, Danièle Bélanger, and Eloy Rivas. 2014. “Reproducing Deportability: Migrant Agricultural Workers in South-western Ontario.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40(9): 1394–413.
- Bélanger, Danièle, and Cenk Saraçoğlu. 2018. “The Governance of Syrian Refugees in Turkey: The State-Capital Nexus and Its Discontents.” *Mediterranean Politics* 25(4): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2018.1549785>.
- Buckley, Michelle. 2013. “Locating Neoliberalism in Dubai: Migrant Workers and Class Struggle in the Autocratic City.” *Antipode* 45(2): 256–74.
- Canefe, Nergis. 2016. “Management of Irregular Migration: Syrians in Turkey as Paradigm Shifters for Forced Migration Studies.” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 54: 9–32.

- Charanpal, S. Bal. 2015. "Dealing with Deportability: Deportation Laws and the Political Personhood of Temporary Migrant Workers in Singapore." *Asian Journal of Law and Society* 2(2): 267.
- Danış, Didem. 2016. "Konfeksiyon Sektöründe Küresel Bağlantılar: Göçmen İşçiler, Sendikalar ve Küresel Çalışma Örgütleri" [Global connections in the textile sector: Migrant workers, unions and global labor organizations]. *Alternatif Politika* 8(3): 562–86.
- Dasse, Lauren K. 2012. "Wage Theft in New York: The Wage Theft Prevention Act as a Counter to an Endemic Problem." *CUNY Law Review* 16: 97–127.
- Del Carpio, Ximena V., Sirma Demir Şeker, and Ahmet Levent Yener. 2018. "Integrating Refugees into the Turkish Labor Market." *Forced Migration Review* 58: 10–13.
- Erdoğan, Seyhan. 2018. "Syrian Refugees in Turkey and Trade Union Responses." *Globalizations* 15(6): 838–53.
- Erol, Ertan, Ayla Ezgi Akyol, Cemal Salman, Ezgi Pinar, Gümüştan İpek, Kıvanç Yiğit Mısırlı, Mustafa Kahveci, and Pedriye Mutlu. 2017. *Suriyeli Sığınmacıların Türkiye'de Emek Piyasasına Dahil Olma Süreçleri ve Etkileri: İstanbul Tekstil Sektörü Örneği* [The participation of the Syrian refugees in the Turkish labor market and its impacts: Istanbul textile sector]. İstanbul: DISK Birleşik Metal-İş Yayınları.
- Fussell, Elizabeth. 2011. "The Deportation Threat Dynamic and Victimization of Latino Migrants: Wage Theft and Robbery." *Sociological Quarterly* 52(4): 593–615.
- Galvin, Daniel J. 2016. "Deterring Wage Theft: Alt-Labor, State Politics, and the Policy Determinants of Minimum Wage Compliance." *Perspectives on Politics* 14(2): 324–50.
- Gibney, Matthew J. 2000. *Outside the Protection of the Law: The Situation of Irregular Migrants in Europe*. Refugee Studies Working Paper no. 6. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hanieh, Adam. 2015. "Overcoming Methodological Nationalism: Spatial Perspectives on Migration to the Gulf Arab States." In *Transit States: Labor, Migration and Citizenship in the Gulf*, edited by Abdulhadi Khalaf, Omer Al Shehaby, and Adam Hanieh, 57–76. London: Pluto Press.
- Lordoğlu, Kuvvet, and Mustafa Aslan. 2016. "En Fazla Suriyeli Göçmen Alan Beş Kentin Emek Piyasalarında Değişimi: 2011–2014" [The changes in the labor market of five cities with the highest Syrian migrant population: 2011–2014]. *Çalışma ve Toplum* 49(2): 789–808.
- Milkman, Ruth, Ana Luz González, and Victor Narro. 2010. *Wage Theft and Workplace Violations in Los Angeles: The Failure of Employment and Labor Law for Low-Wage Workers*. Los Angeles: UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment.
- Petrescu-Prahova, Miruna, and Michael W. Spiller. 2016. "Women's Wage Theft: Explaining Gender Differences in Violations of Wage and Hour Laws." *Work and Occupations* 43(4): 371–400.
- Rajaram, Prem Kumar. 2015. "Common Marginalizations: Neoliberalism, Undocumented Migrants and Other Surplus Populations." *Migration, Mobility, & Displacement* 1(1): 67–80.
- Saraçoğlu, Cenk, and Danièle Bélanger. 2019a. "Syrian Refugees and Turkey: Whose Crisis." In *The Oxford Handbook of Migration Crises*, edited by Cecilia Menjivar, Marie Ruiz, and Immanuel Ness, 279–94. New York: Oxford University Press.

- . 2019b. “Loss and Xenophobia in the City: Contextualizing Anti-Syrian Sentiments in Turkey.” *Patterns of Prejudice* 53(4): 363–83.
- . 2019c. “The Syrian Refugees and Temporary Protection Regime in Turkey: A Spatial Fix for Turkish Capital.” In *Integration through Exploitation: Syrians in Turkey*, edited by Gaye Yılmaz, İsmail Doğa Karatepe, and Tolga Tören, 96–110. Augsburg: Rainer Hampp Verlag
- Shneikat, Belal, and Chris Ryan. 2018. “Syrian Refugees and Their Re-entry to ‘Normality’: The Role of Service Industries.” *Service Industries Journal* 38(3–4): 201–27.
- Sung, Hung-En, Sheyla Delgado, Deysbel Peña, and Amalia Paladino. 2013. “Tyrannizing Strangers for Profit: Wage Theft, Cross-Border Migrant Workers, and the Politics of Exclusion in an Era of Global Economic Integration.” In *Outside Justice*, edited by David C. Brotherton, Daniele L. Stageman, and Shirley P. Leyro, 247–67. New York: Springer.
- Taykhan, Nicole. 2016. “Defying Silence: Immigrant Women Workers, Wage Theft, and Anti-retaliation Policy in the States.” *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 32: 96.
- Theodore Nik, Abel Valenzuela, and Edwin Melendez. 2009. “Worker Centers: Defending Labor Standards for Migrant Workers in the Informal Economy.” *International Journal of Manpower* 30 (September): 422–36.
- TEPAV. 2018. *Syrian Entrepreneurship and Refugee Start-ups in Turkey: Leveraging the Turkish Experience*. Retrieved 12 July 2019 from https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1566830992-6.TEPAV_and_EBRD___Syrian_Entrepreneurship_and_Refugee_Start_ups_in_Turkey_Lever....pdf.
- UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). 2019. “Syria Regional Refugee Response, Turkey.” Retrieved 9 May 2019 from <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/113>.
- . 2021 “Operational Update, Turkey.” Retrieved 30 October 2021 from <https://reporting.unhcr.org/document/1010>.