# A Tale of Resistance: Conversation with a Woman Striker

written by Nevin Kaplan | March 8, 2014

The workers of Punto Leather Factory, located at Kazliceşme in the district of Zeytinburnu in Istanbul, have been organized in their union, Deriteks, for a decent livelihood and decent working conditions. They stand against harsh working conditions, health and safety problems, denial of their constitutional right to unionize, disadvantageous health insurance plans, prohibitions against using their annual leave entitlements; in summary they stand against working in conditions of slavery. The workers, who have been fired by their employer who seeks to ban workers' participation in trade unions, have been resisting in front of their factory to protect their rights for 197 days now.

According to our findings, there are around four thousand factories in this area; in the leather and textiles sector there are 25, 000 leather workers who are registered in the Social Security system while employed there are also as many unregistered workers. Thirty percent of these workers are women employed in the leather industry with no record, no insurance and working in unsafe conditions. The problems are common to all workers employed in the leather industry. This is the first instance of resistance in this sector and for this reason it is very important.

Of the fifty or more women who work at Punto Leather Factory, we spoke to Hülya Alptekin, who is the first woman to become a union member and who for that reason was fired from work. Alptekin explained her determination to resist with the following words "we will resist until we win our rights!…"

**• Can you tell us the story of this resistance, how did it start and what has this time of resisting taught you?**

When we first organized against bad working conditions and for our right of "freedom to organize," I got fired because I had become a union member. This happened despite me doing my job well and not having received a warning during the time I had been employed. We formed a working-place committee together with a few friends, I became the women's representative, we had some demands laid out regarding the amelioration of our working conditions. The employer held a meeting with us: "What is this business of forming a committee? Drop out of the union, resign," he told us and offered to make dirty deals with us. We were promised for example double pay. But when he saw that we remained determined, he said that our labor contracts had been terminated.

When we first started our resistance, we were offered a lot of money. But we were constantly in touch with our union, we needed to be organized in the name of workers' solidarity, for our rights, in order to be able to act collectively. We wanted to use our legal rights. We wanted the right to negotiate for what we deserve; this was our only option. We had nothing to loose, nothing but our labor. Most of us had been working for over ten years and we had been exploited long enough. We needed to say Stop! to this exploitation. Right now, in total, there are 79 of us resisting. There are 20 more union members like us inside the factory, the rest are not part of the resistance. They fear loosing their jobs.

**• Can you say a little bit more about the work that you do, how many hours you work, how much do you get paid when you work overtime?**

Where I work, hand-made high-quality products are produced out of a variety of animal skins and

they are provided for the world's richest at very high prices. In other sectors, the use the Böve machinery that works with chemicals, the water waste inside the machine causes lung diseases. The workers have to check in to the hospital once every three months and they have to spend time there to get treatment but this is kept a secret. The environment we work in is not healthy, the air circulation is not at sufficient levels, we inhale leather dust and fur. Our lunch and tea break time is cut from our paychecks. The food quality is very low. Our service hours are not reflected correctly on the payroll. We are working more than that is shown on the payrolls. When male workers have family members that have health problems, they are not given time off. If they do get time off, it is unpaid. We are not allowed to take annual leaves. There are a lot of accidents at work, but they are covered up.

**• As a woman worker, can you describe the problems that you face as a result of being a woman, also which demands are the most important for you?**

The working conditions are not suitable for women. As women, we think we are more oppressed and subjected to exploitation. Our shifts start at 8 am, it can be often 10 pm when we are able to leave. There is no shuttle service, we do not get reimbursed for transport expenditures. Our family members come to pick us up from the factory at night. But when we say "become union members for the amelioration of working hours and working conditions," the families put pressure on women not to become union members. There is no daycare for children, despite the fact that there are leather factories in the area and there are a lot of working women in them, there is no daycare that can serve the whole area.

On paper, women workers appear to use their maternal leaves, but in reality they work almost until the day they give birth. Even when they make use of paid leave, because insurance payments are so low, the pay is low. As it is, we live below the poverty levels. Usually, women do not want to use their maternal leaves, because after they give birth, they are laid off after they return back to work. Besides, as women workers, even though we do the same work, we are not paid the same amounts as men, our paychecks are less. In the eyes of the employer, women are not fit, there is gender difference. We are made to work more than men while being paid less than them. There is actually so much to tell, our hearts are full! We want equal pay for equal work. We want daycare, we want our constitutional right to organize.

**• What would you like to say regarding the conditions, the problems women workers experience and their needs in their working lives?**

Women's biggest problem is the lack of security regarding their employments, the fear of being laid off because it is usually women who are first fired. At home they are judged by their spouses and their fathers; they cannot make their own decisions. Even though they work, they do not have "economic freedom." They are not free in their individual lives although their struggles are fought at the workplace and at home. Our most important demand is that we are given the right to speak, we want to be listened to, we want our voice to be heard. If we have security in our jobs, everything will be different.

**• As a woman, what kind of reactions did you receive from your social circle? In the leather industry sprawled in this area, there are approximately four thousand factories and thirty percent of the workers are women. You are the only woman who is part of this resistance. It cannot be easy at all to be doing this.**

Yes, it has not been easy at all. I have been told: You are a woman, what are you doing among the rest of them? I wear the veil so they do not expect me to be part of the struggle and take part in the front rows. But the struggle for our labor and my struggle as a woman is what are important to me.

Other things also happened for example. It was during the first days. I had just left the area and on my way out I came across the brother of the factory's boss. He stopped me and said, "Go sit in your house. What is your business among all those men." Psychologically, I felt very bad. So, I said to him, "For years and years we worked, men and women side-by-side, now it suddenly occurred to you that I am a woman." I shared this story with my resistance friends, though later on the person denied what had happened.

**• Is there gender discrimination?**

As a woman, one is always on the second plan. We always face gender discrimination and inequality. Psychological harassment, oppression, and mobbing as well.

**• What is your relationship with your surroundings, how are you received? What other kinds of pressures are you subjected to?**

The shopkeepers in our vicinity do not sell us tea, etc., the bosses are constantly threatening these small merchants that they will be sacked if they provide us with anything. Undercover police officers come here to ask questions. They ask a few questions and leave. We do not break anything, we do not hurt anyone, we only chant our slogans.

**• Are you married? What does it mean to be a working woman, how does it affect the work you do at home and your life in the factory? Did you face any kind of coercion by your family when you became a union member?**

I am not married but I do not need to be married to take on responsibility, to organize and to be part of the struggle. I want to protect my economic independence. I believe in union organizing and in the struggle. I think I can achieve my social and other rights by getting organized. If we act together, we can make our voice heard, we can win our rights. My family supports me. I told my family about my union membership. My mother never attended school, she is a woman from Anatolia but she has always supported me in what I do. The situation of the married women workers at the factory is very difficult. They work until late at night, including on the weekends. The wages are very low. They are exploited at home and at work. Their economic situation is very bad, they have to work and their biggest fear is getting fired. Their husbands do not want them to become union members. At work, they face the injustices of the employer, at home those of their husbands. Those of them who become members hide it, the reason being the fear of being fired.

**• During the time of your resistance, did you receive any support by women organizations, women in other trade unions or the media, what are your expectations regarding this issue?**

We did not get the right support by women. Some people said that women organizations, feminist women will probably show support. I never saw the feminist women here. We reproach the lack of feminist support. There was passivity regarding our resistance. We need the support of women's organizations and unions. The women who are inside do not even greet us, we are alone outside of the factory. We need our voice to be heard, we need solidarity. Except for a few media outlets, the media does not talk about us, we are not on the news. There is Fox TV here. Come we said and report about us but they did not come, so we protested in front of the news channel building, later we protested on the road along the shore, after that they showed up.

**• Are you going to take part in the protests and the activities organized on the 8th of March on "Women's International Unity Struggle and Solidarity"day?**

As the only woman in the leather sector who has become part of this labor resistance, I would like to participate in the 8th of March activities, even though I have been left alone. All women should unite on the International Women's Day, if we stand united we will be very strong. As long as we break our traditional taboos… Let us organize in life and in labor and let us be in solidarity with each other. We need this during this time. All wars have been won when women were part of them, if we women stand united, there is no struggle that shall not be won.

Translated by Erka Kosta

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