

## 8 Victory through solidarity?

### The story of a women workers' strike in Turkey's Antalya Free Zone

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On 26 September 2006, more than 80 women workers went on strike in Turkey's Antalya Free Zone. The strike followed in the wake of a drawn-out dispute related to working conditions and organising at Novamed – a subsidiary of the Germany-headquartered company Fresenius Medical Care (FMC), which is 'the world's largest integrated provider of products and services for individuals undergoing dialysis because of chronic kidney failure'. (FMC, 2009: 9) With at least a certain amount of success on the part of the workers and their union, a negotiated settlement of 18 December 2007, brought the strike to an end. In this chapter, we examine how practices of solidarity across levels, borders and social groups contributed positively to what has been hailed as a great 'victory' for the strikers. Acknowledging that a victory can quickly turn into a defeat, we also discuss some challenges or limits related to solidarity across borders and social groups beyond the strike itself.

In what follows, we begin by narrating the struggle on the part of the Novamed workers to organise and obtain a collective agreement at the workplace. In the second section, we map the support and solidarities at work in the Novamed struggle. The third section assesses the role played by solidarity in connection with the immediate aims of improving working conditions and concluding a collective agreement at Novamed. This is followed by a discussion on solidarity beyond the strike, and we round off the chapter with a few concluding remarks.<sup>1</sup>

#### **From organising to collective agreement at Novamed**

In September 2004, some workers at Novamed initiated a campaign to establish a union in the workplace. This campaign was motivated primarily by two factors: First, dissatisfaction with the salaries at Novamed. While above the minimum wage and not the lowest within the Antalya Free Zone, the salaries were supposedly lower than those found in companies within similar lines of business in Turkey (Interview No. 1). Second, dissatisfaction with the more general working conditions at Novamed. According to the organised workers and their union, the conditions that existed at the time when the organising was initiated included queuing for permission to become pregnant, toilet use monitoring, the need for permission to get married, restrictions on communication among the workers, very

short work breaks, various kinds of humiliating treatment, and attempts to control what the workers did when off the clock (Petrol-İş, 2008: 8, 32).<sup>2</sup>

The actual organising at Novamed was kicked off by a male worker with prior union experience and some contacts in the regional branch of the Petroleum, Chemical and Rubber Workers' Union of Turkey (Petrol-İş). This worker initially mobilised and introduced two male co-workers to representatives of Petrol-İş and, together with the union, they developed a strategy whereby the further organising at Novamed would be done secretly through either the establishment of small groups of workers, or one-to-one communication with individual workers – this, against the background of the general union hostility in Turkey. In both cases, they utilised community-based relations among the workers, and also engaged directly with some of the workers' families. Meetings with small groups of 'trusted' workers and some of their family members took place in the homes of those driving the organising, and newly recruited members were later introduced to and received training from Petrol-İş representatives (Interview No. 1). The two initial such union meetings were arranged in January and March 2005 with 15 and 80 workers respectively (Petrol-İş, 2008: 8, 228).

Even if the strategy worked fairly well – with 158 out of 264 workers unionised by April 2005 – the organising came to the attention of the Novamed management, which allegedly engaged in various activities aimed at undermining it. According to the workers and their union, this counter-campaign consisted of two elements: First, the management engaged in intimidation and psychological blackmailing of a general kind – this, for instance, by stressing that the workers were indebted to them for their jobs, and threatening to move the factory to another country, to make the working conditions worse if there was a union, and to treat organised workers worse than non-organised ones. Second, the management allegedly engaged in harassment and humiliation of a more individualised kind – this, for instance, by giving known union members more heavy workloads or schedules, and cross-interrogating workers suspected of being or considering to become organised (Interview No. 1; Petrol-İş, 2008: 80, 228).<sup>3</sup>

Due to some workers quitting the union, Petrol-İş pushed ahead with the formalities related to organising in Turkey. Upon its request, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security (MLSS) officially designated the sector in which the Novamed workers should be organised as the one covered by Petrol-İş in late March 2005. With that settled, Petrol-İş applied to the MLSS for a certificate of authorization at Novamed on 11 May 2005. Although the number of organised Novamed workers had dropped to 136 by this date, it still constituted the majority as required for a union to obtain legal competence to conclude a collective agreement at a workplace, and Petrol-İş was recognised by the MLSS as having organised the majority of Novamed workers on 8 June 2005. When informed about this, Novamed filed a court case based on the claims that both the sector designation made by the MLSS and the reported numbers of Novamed employees and unionised workers were erroneous. These claims were rejected by the Antalya Labour Court on 8 December 2005 (Document No. 1), and Novamed's appeal of the decision was likewise rejected by the High Supreme Court on 6 February 2006 (Document No. 2).

Although Petrol-İş was finally granted a certificate of authorization by the MLSS in March 2006, Novamed's legal challenge had clear implications for the workers' campaign. First, it significantly delayed the point at which the workers could engage the management in collective bargaining through the union of their choice. Second, it allegedly gave the Novamed management additional time to counter the organising efforts. On the one hand, it initiated some improvements in the working conditions – this, allegedly, in order to avoid additional workers joining the union and, perhaps, to get some others to quit it. On the other hand, the management intensified its efforts to force workers to resign or quit the union (Interview No. 3; Akgökçe and Kaplan, 2006). Two organised workers were dismissed in October and November 2005 respectively, and the overall number of unionised workers went down from 136 to 117 during the court case period.

Having received the certificate of authorisation for collective bargaining, Petrol-İş invited Novamed to initiate negotiations on 31 March 2006. In accordance with legal requirements, the invitation letter included a set of proposals that would serve as the basis for subsequent negotiations. The parties met four times in April and May 2006, and although the atmosphere of the negotiations is said to have been friendly, there were what proved to be irresolvable disputes related primarily to financial and procedural issues (Interview No. 4; Interview No. 5). In late May 2006, the union concluded that there was no point in continuing negotiations for the full two months allowed for by the law, and declared the negotiations inconclusive (Interview No. 5). In accordance with legal procedures, the MLSS automatically referred the dispute to arbitration, and appointed a university professor as the arbiter. The arbiter made some suggestions aimed at reconciling the differences, and brought the parties together for direct talks on 6 July 2006. However, this could not resolve the dispute, and the arbiter's report of 17 July 2006 declared that no agreement had been reached between Novamed and Petrol-İş (Document No. 3).

The inconclusive arbitration left Petrol-İş with the options of either deciding to call a strike in 7–12 days, or losing its certificate. While acknowledging its weakness related to both the majority of Novamed workers no longer being organised, and a prospective strike involving primarily young women with no prior union experience, it nonetheless decided to call a strike. However, this call would be followed by a request for a strike ballot, and the hope was for the result to be negative so that the union could refer the case to the High Court of Arbitration (Interview No. 5). Accordingly, the union declared its decision to call a strike on 11 August 2006, and 83 organised workers filed a strike-ballot request with the MLSS's Regional Directorate of Labour shortly thereafter. When the ballot was held on 25 August 2006, 289 out of 315 workers participated, with 87 and 199 valid votes against and in favour of strike respectively (Document No. 4). While the votes against were cast by organised workers, the vast majority of votes in favour were cast by non-organised workers – this, allegedly, with the support of the Novamed management (Petrol-İş, 2008: 16). Left with the options of going on strike within 60 days or losing its certificate, the union initiated a strike on 26 September 2006.

At the outset, the strike seemed doomed to fail. First, only 85 of the 117 organised workers went on strike – the remaining ones deciding not to join either

because of the likelihood of it being unsuccessful, or with reference to their legal right not to participate (Interview No. 1) – and they counted for little more than 26 per cent of Novamed’s overall workforce at the time. Second, the strikers were for the main part women assembly workers rather than male workers occupying more strategically important positions (e.g. technicians, laboratory workers and sterilisation personnel), and whose absence from the workplace would have had a more immediate impact on Novamed’s ability to maintain business as usual. A related reason to why the strike was unlikely to achieve much is that Novamed had increased its workforce in the run-up to the strike, with 49 new workers recruited in the period between the break-down of negotiations on 19 July 2006 and the union’s strike announcement of 11 August 2006, and an additional 26 new workers recruited in the period between the strike announcement and the initiation of the strike on 26 September 2006 (Document No. 5). According to Petrol-İş, Novamed also made extensive use of overtime work and employed scab workers during the strike.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of their weak position, the strikers remained resilient, and following more than a year with hardly any contact between Petrol-İş and the Novamed management, negotiations were re-initiated in late October 2007. The two parties met twice in Istanbul before concluding a three-year collective agreement on 18 December 2007. According to the agreement (Document No. 6), the strikers would return to work on 2 January 2008, and their wages would then be increased with 9.2 per cent compared with what they were when the strike began. Furthermore, the workers covered by the agreement would receive wage increases as follows over a three-year period: five per cent for the first year, and four per cent for the second and third year. Lastly, the agreement contained a ‘social package’ whereby workers would receive a payment for each of two religious holidays, as well as productivity and attendance bonuses. To the strikers, their union and most supporters, the conclusion of a collective agreement at Novamed represented a great victory.

### **Solidarities at work in the Novamed struggle**

While the degree of victory can be questioned, whatever was achieved in and through the strike at Novamed was a product of efforts made not merely by the strikers and their union, but also by their many supporters inside and outside of Turkey. In what follows, we provide a fairly comprehensive overview of who did what in support of the Novamed workers on strike.

#### *Strikers*

Strong mutual support prevailed among the workers on strike, the clearest indication of which was the fact that only three strikers quit the union and returned to work in the course of the strike. While some of the strikers were linked to each other through community-based ties – this, as a result of Novamed’s recruitment practices drawing on such – many others knew little of each other before the strike. However, being on strike together proved to have a strong unifying effect.

Not only did they picket together and further develop a common understanding of their position at the workplace, but they increasingly also engaged in common activities like dining and swimming, participated in each others' engagement and marriage celebrations, joined the mourning of deaths inside of co-strikers' families, and developed close friendships that involved also other family members (Interview No. 6).

### *Families*

While several workers experienced difficulties with their families in the process of organising at Novamed, they overall got strong support from them during the strike itself (Yılmaz and Akgökçe, 2007). At the outset, some workers hesitated to join the union due to a fear of how their families would respond to it. To some extent, this problem was overcome with a strategy aimed at incorporating families – or, to be more specific, male family members – in both the organising and the strike. A case in point concerns a woman worker who quit the union when her husband threatened to divorce her, and re-joined it after her husband had been involved by the union (Interview No. 1). When asked during the one-year strike anniversary if their fathers, husbands, brothers and boyfriends had been supportive or obstructive in connection with the strike, the women workers on strike responded collectively that they had been very supportive. Needless to say, the extent and type of support provided by family members varied a lot.

### *Local actors*

After the strike ballot left the union with no option but to go on strike, a group of organised workers approached various local actors in order to get support. Guided to some extent by a very supportive journalist, they contacted branches of political parties, municipalities, professional associations, and media institutions in Antalya (Interview No. 7). With respect to political parties, they received extensive support from the local branches of centre-left and more left-wing parties. Representatives of such parties paid solidarity visits to the picket line, and several of them signed a broad-based leftist press announcement in support of the strikers on 12 November 2006, provided material support during the strike, and took active part in the one-year strike anniversary. The strikers received similar support also from two municipalities governed by the centre-left Republican People's Party, one of which also made locations available for the strikers to arrange charity fairs to raise money through the sales of home-made food and handicraft products.

Among professional associations, the local branch of the Chamber of Dentists provided free dental care during the strike, while the branches of the Chamber of Pharmacists and the Chamber of Electrical Engineers provided various kinds of solidarity support (including food aid). The last mentioned chamber was particularly supportive, and even the Istanbul branch organised a meeting on the strike, and contributed financially to solidarity visits on the part of women's groups in connection with the one-year strike anniversary. Complementing this, the local

branch made its facilities available to the visitors during their stay in Antalya (Interview No. 8). With regard to the media, the Novamed strike was covered by all local newspapers, but received particularly supportive coverage by two newspapers (Akdeniz Gerçek and Antalya Körfez) as well as the local branches of two leftist TV stations (Ulusal TV and Hayat TV). With respect to wider coverage of a supportive kind, mentioning can be made also of a few leftist newspapers (Evrensel and Birgün) and portals (Bianet and Sol).

### *Petrol-İş*

Although there were some differences of opinion in the central office in Istanbul, Petrol-İş provided strong support to the Novamed workers not merely during the strike, but since the organising was initiated in late 2004. While the organising strategy was developed and implemented by the regional branch, the central office contributed with training of organised Novamed workers, gathering of information from and enlisting the support of unions outside of Turkey, as well as with legal assistance in connection with court cases and the collective bargaining. After the strike was initiated, Petrol-İş provided the strikers with both regular and irregular payments, as well as material help packages consisting of food and other necessities. Beyond material support, Petrol-İş organised weekly meetings and training of the strikers, arranged press conferences, and sought to give the strikers as much positive publicity as possible through media engagement. The Petrol-İş leadership paid several visits to Antalya, and also arranged the statutory meeting of its Council of Presidents there in mid November 2006 (Petrol-İş, 2008: 15). In a strike support action without precedence in Turkey, the union presidents altogether paid a visit to the picket line. Last but not least, Petrol-İş put a lot of effort into mobilising other actors in support of the Novamed strikers. An early case in point was the initiation of a LabourStart online campaign in late October 2006, which received 2,178 supporters before it was closed. While additional mobilising efforts were initially directed at other unions, they later targeted also women's groups.

### *Other unions in Turkey*

The Novamed strikers received extensive support from the confederation with which Petrol-İş is affiliated, namely the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (Türk-İş), as well as from other unions affiliated with it. Although Türk-İş was quick to express solidarity after the strike was initiated, and several representatives – including the General Secretary – paid solidarity visits to the picket line during the strike, most of its support was channelled through its regional union representative, the Road, Structure and Construction Workers' Union of Turkey (Yol-İş). This union not only paid multiple visits to the picket line and provided food aid to the strikers, but also made its facilities available for Petrol-İş's meetings, and actively sought to mobilise other local unions in support of the strikers. In addition to ordinary solidarity support, the Forestry-Irrigation-Agriculture and Agriculture Industry Workers' Union of Turkey (Tarım-İş) also made its

facilities available to Petrol-İş, while the Postal, Telegraph, Telephone, Radio and Television Workers' Union of Turkey (Haber-İş) became a very active supporter when its own members went on strike at Türk Telekom in November 2007. Mutual visits on the part of union representatives at the two workplaces represent one of the few instances of worker-to-worker solidarity in connection with the Novamed strike. Beyond Türk-İş, the Novamed strikers received support also from the local branches of the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey (DISK) and the Confederation of Public Employees' Trade Union (KESK), which signed the broad-based leftist press announcement in support of the strikers in November 2006, paid several solidarity visits to the picket line, and took actively part in the one-year strike anniversary (Interview No. 9).

### *Unions outside of Turkey*

The strikers and Petrol-İş received strong support from several unions located outside of Turkey, particularly from those with which Petrol-İş was institutionally affiliated – namely, the German Chemical, Mining and Energy Industrial Union (IG BCE), the European Mine, Chemical and Energy Workers' Federation (EMCEF), and the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Union (ICEM). These unions were engaged by Petrol-İş in connection with Novamed already in January 2005, and were regularly informed about the organising efforts among the workers (Petrol-İş, 2008: 227–50). Upon requests for assistance related to problems at Novamed, IG BCE and EMCEF provided Petrol-İş with information about FMC, and played central roles in bringing cases of alleged worker harassment and union repression to the attention of the FMC management – this, either by communicating and meeting directly with it, or by bringing such cases before the FMC Works Council (Interview No. 10; Interview No. 11).

Following the initiation of the strike in late September 2006, the unions in question engaged in various activities aimed at supporting the Novamed strikers and Petrol-İş. First, they initiated solidarity campaigns, with EMCEF preparing a 'protest letter' in October 2006, and ICEM preparing a 'support letter' in connection with 8 March 2007. Second, they organised solidarity visits to Antalya, with EMCEF General Secretary and IG BCE International Department Representative visiting Novamed in April 2007, 16 energy-sector trade union leaders from various countries visiting the picket line in May 2007, ICEM General Secretary and Chemicals and Rubber Industries Officer visiting the strikers in August 2007, and a four-person ICEM Women's Committee delegation paying a visit in connection with the first anniversary of the strike. Third, the ICEM Executive Committee passed a resolution on the strike in May 2007. Last, they made 'efforts behind the scenes' (ICEM, 2007) or engaged in quiet diplomacy vis-à-vis the FMC management in Germany in order to get the dispute resolved.

In response to calls for solidarity on the part of not only Petrol-İş, EMCEF and ICEM, but also union women connected to women's groups, a large number of union representatives from across the world expressed solidarity by sending

support faxes and emails to the strikers and Petrol-İş, and protest faxes and emails to Novamed and FMC managers. Such solidarity action was particularly prominent in connection with the strike's first anniversary, and was expressed by international unions like the women's committees of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), as well as many national and sector-specific unions.

### *Women's groups*

The Novamed strikers received strong support from women's groups in Turkey in the wake of 8 March 2007. Petrol-İş organised the strikers' celebration of the International Women's Day in both Antalya and Istanbul, and this became the occasion on which many women and women's groups learned about the strike and met with some of the women strikers. While this sparked off isolated initiatives like Filmmor Women's Cooperative making a documentary film on the Novamed strike, it took until the end of the summer for a group of women in Istanbul to take more comprehensive action in support of them. Having learned that ICEM would send a Women's Committee delegation to Antalya in connection with the one-year strike anniversary, they decided that they should also contribute by establishing a Women's Platform for Solidarity with Novamed Strikers (Interview No. 12). The group in question mobilised support for this idea, and the platform was established with the participation of 29 feminist groups and women representatives of unions, professional organisations and political parties.

The aim of the platform was to make the women strikers visible and put pressure on Novamed to sign a collective agreement. Within a few weeks, they prepared posters and leaflets, initiated email- and fax-based support and protest campaigns, opened stalls in busy Istanbul streets in order to provide information to people and collect signatures to be submitted to the parliament, organised demonstrations in front of FMC's offices in Istanbul, collected money for the strikers, established a press commission to get media attention, and circulated information about the strike through domestic and international networks (Interview No. 12). Inspired by these activities, similar platforms and actions were initiated in several other cities. On the day of the first anniversary of the strike, women from across Turkey travelled to Antalya in a show of solidarity with the strikers. Afterwards, the women's groups initiated a second round of actions, which included also the establishment of a website (<http://www.novamedayanismagrubu.org>) and the organisation of a photo exhibition on wheels.<sup>5</sup>

### **Assessing solidarity in the Novamed struggle**

When considering the role played by solidarity in the Novamed struggle, it should initially be pointed out that it made a difference also prior to the strike. In fact, it can be argued that the struggle would perhaps not have reached the strike stage had it not been for the solidarity practiced at the earlier organising stage. In this connection, it is worth reminding that Petrol-İş established contact with IG BCE,

EMCEF and ICEM even before it began to recruit Novamed workers. Later, when the organising efforts were met with alleged opposition and anti-union campaigns on the part of Novamed, there is much to indicate that the worst excesses of those campaigns were disciplined as a result of actions taken by unions outside of Turkey – this, in the sense that things got periodically better after the external unions had raised the problems with FMC in Germany. If it was not for the close cooperation established between Petrol-İş and the external unions, then the organising efforts would possibly have been undermined at an early point.

Turning to the strike itself, it is clear that the support and solidarity outlined in the previous section contributed positively to the morale and resilience on the part of the strikers. While the mutual support and solidarity among the strikers and in relation to their families prevented everyday doubts from gaining control of them, the support from further afield and the overall publicity that the strike received – including, it can be noted, through coverage in mainstream national newspapers – regularly reminded them that they were not alone in their struggle, that many other people cared for them, and that their struggle was of great importance not merely for themselves, but also for many other people located in Turkey and abroad. This gave the strikers a sense of being engaged in a struggle on the part of the many, and they wanted to prove to both themselves and others that they were capable of living up to the responsibility that it implied.

Shifting focus towards the end of the strike, there is little doubt that the support and solidarity outlined in the previous section contributed positively also to a collective agreement being concluded in mid December 2007. While the local Novamed management seems to have been minimally affected in any direct sense by the show of support for the workers on strike, the situation turned out to be different for the FMC management in Germany. No matter how much they might have wished for the conflict to be dealt with at the local level, both the general publicity created around the strike and the direct actions taken by non-local actors kept forcing it onto them. Based on what seems to have been a fear of the Novamed strike impacting negatively on its global image, the FMC management accepted that it had to get more directly engaged in resolving the conflict (Interview No. 11; Interview No. 13). Following a meeting with representatives of IG BCE, EMCEF and ICEM in late September 2007, the way was paved for a re-initiation of local negotiations, which led to an agreement being concluded within a relatively short period.

Although effective to a large extent, the support and solidarity related to the Novamed struggle was also somewhat underdeveloped. First, while the solidarity among the strikers was strong, most workers were not organised, and quite a few organised workers did not join the strike. Second, while the strikers received strong support from their own union, Türk-İş, other unions affiliated with Türk-İş, and the local branches and women representatives of DİSK and KESK, yet other confederations remained passive in relation to the Novamed strike. Furthermore, union support almost exclusively involved official representatives rather than ordinary members. Third, while the strikers received support from the local branches and women representatives of centre-left and more left-wing political parties, as well

as from local municipalities controlled by one of them, central party apparatuses and political institutions located in Ankara did not get involved in the Novamed struggle. Fourth, while the strikers received strong support from external unions organising workers within the same sector, more comprehensive union support from outside of Turkey was limited to the women branches of ITUC, ETUC and national unions affiliated with them. Lastly, while the strikers received strong support from the women branches of various unions around the world, the support from external women's groups was more limited.

Rather than being automatic, solidarity must be actively brought into action in particular instances. In the Novamed case, union support was for the main part mobilised through institutionalised channels of solidarity. While such channels are both quick and efficient, a possible drawback is that one can easily get stuck inside of particular institutional relations. With respect to women's groups, solidarity was mobilised more spontaneously and through a much less formal network of relationships. In connection with this mobilisation, a key point to note is the enabling role played by the strike being conceptualised as a 'women's strike' through a dialogical process involving union officials in Petrol-İş and ICEM around New Year 2007. While a union feminist in *Petrol-İş Kadın* played a key role in activating the women's network in Istanbul, there is much to indicate that particular individuals and their personal networks played important roles also more generally. For instance, both friendships across unions in Turkey, and the nationalities of union representatives outside of Turkey seem to have made a positive difference with regard to inter-union solidarity. Furthermore, the personal networks of a few individuals played central roles in mobilising local support for the workers.

Overall, it is clear that the support for the Novamed workers did not add up to a unified and coordinated solidarity campaign. While there certainly was coordination among some local supporters, among unions inside and outside of Turkey, and among women's groups in Turkey, the totality of solidarity practices is best characterised as parallel rather than joint. This was the case not least with respect to the highly coordinated activities of Petrol-İş and the external unions with which it was affiliated on the one hand, and the less coordinated activities of city-based women's platforms on the other hand. Considering the overall lack of coordination, the question can be raised if this had an impact on the effectiveness of the solidarity practices. While one can imagine that closer cooperation and coordination could have improved the effectiveness, it is also plausible that attempts at closer coordination could have undermined the overall support for the Novamed strikers – this, because the limited coordination enabled different people to express support on bases that others would not necessarily agree with.

With regard to the solidarity that was practiced in the Novamed case, the question can also be raised as to what extent it is possible and makes sense to rank them in terms of relative importance. For instance, was the solidarity practiced across borders more important than the one provided locally, or was the solidarity on the part of unions more important than the support provided by women's groups? Needless to say, there is no easy way to measure this. While it is possible to identify certain direct connections between a particular solidarity practice and a particular

outcome – for instance, the first anniversary visits on the part of women’s groups in relation to the strikers’ determination to keep the strike going, or the meeting between external unions and the FMC management in late September 2007 in relation to the re-initiation of collective agreement negotiations – it cannot be concluded from this that the solidarity practices in question were more important than others. Rather, we would emphasise how solidarity across levels and on the part of various actors mutually reinforced each other.

Although it was the combined solidarity across levels, borders and social groups that made the difference in the Novamed case, it is important to stress that this positive difference was not independent of characteristics related to the workplace as such. More specifically, the case at hand seems to confirm the view that ‘collective agreements may be more likely to be wrung out of multinational enterprises, fearing consumer reaction to the glare of bad publicity generated by international campaigns’ (ICFTU, 2004: 13). In this connection, it should be emphasised both that FMC has since long prided itself and been prided by others for being a socially responsible company – with, for instance, the Ethisphere Institute declaring it the world’s most ethical healthcare company in 2008 (<http://ethisphere.com/wme2008>) – and that the negative publicity campaigns related to Novamed proved very successful in FMC increasingly being portrayed on the world wide web and beyond as a company engaged in super-exploitation of women workers in Turkey. As mentioned earlier, this seems to have had a significant impact on the FMC management wishing to get the industrial conflict resolved in the autumn of 2007.

### **Solidarity beyond the ‘victory’**

While the campaign to organise and obtain a collective agreement at Novamed proved successful in many respects, the victory remains quite shaky. One lesson that can be drawn from successful solidarity campaigns in the past is that ‘victories can turn into defeats’ (Armsbruster-Sandoval, 2003: 570). In the Novamed case, the union’s position at the workplace is weak in membership terms, and it is fully possible that the number of organised workers will be below the 50 per cent required for the union to retain its legal competence to represent the workers when the current collective agreement expires in December 2010. An important reason for this is the extensive fear among workers of what the management might do to them if they join the union. Against this background and a certain drop in union membership, it has been emphasised that ‘the struggle is not over at Novamed’, and that the workers are in need of further support and solidarity (Korkut, 2008).

With respect to external unions, support will undoubtedly be forthcoming in the case that the Novamed workers and their union are subjected to treatment of the kind that prevailed earlier (Interview No. 10; Interview No. 11; Interview No. 13). However, if Petrol-İş loses its certificate and its membership base at Novamed dwindles further, then little will remain in the form of an institutional basis for external unions to get involved in support of Novamed workers. In this connection, it is important to keep in mind that Turkey is a country in which labour is very weak in relation to both capital and the state, and where ‘private sector workers suffer

brutal anti-union harassment, including dismissals, while strikers face police violence and arrests' (ITUC, 2008). Although the legal framework protects most core labour rights, it is poorly enforced in practice, and the penalties for law-breaking corporations are much too soft to have a deterrence effect. Given this situation, the question can be raised as to what the external unions can do to support the workers at Novamed.

One option can be for them to put pressure on FMC to ensure that the Novamed management operates in accordance with both the labour law in Turkey – including, not least, the right of workers to organise with the union of their choice – and the 'highest standard of ethics' that FMC claims adherence to in its Compliance Program (<http://www.fmc-ag.com>). Given the weakness of its *Code of Business Conduct* (FMC, 2007), however, external unions can also put pressure on FMC to revise its code to include explicit reference to basic workers' rights. Another option could be for ICEM to negotiate a Global Framework Agreement (GFA) with FMC, which is something Petrol-İş requested IG BCE to consider in August 2008 (Document No. 7). While the weaknesses of GFAs are well known (Stevies and Boswell, 2007), such an agreement could nonetheless contribute to reduce the insecurity felt by Novamed workers when being or considering becoming organised (Wills, 2002). Yet another option could be for external unions to promote and contribute to the establishment of a cross-border union network within FMC that can coordinate activities and take on the company more collectively – this, either related to or independently of the Fresenius SE Works Council (FWC). Again, inclusion in such a network can contribute to reduce the insecurity felt by Novamed workers when being or considering to become organised.

Unfortunately, the prospects for deeper and more proactive solidarity support on the part of external unions are not particularly promising. With respect to IG BCE, international labour solidarity is clearly secondary to its pursuit of social partnership and dialogue in Germany (Dribbush and Schulten, 2008), and it has no intention neither to push FMC to revise its code of conduct or sign a GFA, nor to take an initiative to the development of a union network within FMC (Interview No. 10). Both IG BCE and ICEM have a strong sense of FMC not being interested in signing a GFA (Interview No. 10; Interview No. 13; Document No. 8), and their current strategic outlook rules out a more adversarial campaign aimed at pushing FMC to negotiate and sign such an agreement. Moreover, the external unions in question consider there to be no basis for the establishment of a union network within FMC – this, partly because there has been no broader demand for it, and partly because a network already exists in the form of the FWC in Europe (Interview No. 10; Interview No. 13). In the latter connection, it can also be noted that external unions have no intention to push for Turkey to be included in the FWC (Document No. 9; Document No. 10). Due in part to the influence of IG BCE, both EMCEF and ICEM have for the main part adopted its 'social-liberal' position, and there is much to indicate that ICEM has largely abandoned its earlier strategy of countering the power of global capital (ICEM, 1996) in favour of a more accommodating strategy consisting of partnership and dialogue with TNCs and governments (Routledge and Cumbers, 2009: 139–72).

Turning to solidarity on the part of women's groups, it is important at the outset to be clear about the exact basis on which they were mobilised in 2007 – namely, the location of women within patriarchal relations of power at Novamed. In other words, they mobilised in support of the workers primarily within the context of their broader struggle against patriarchy. In the Novamed case, this struggle went parallel to that of Petrol-İş, which took a clear stance in defence of their rights as workers *and* women – this, even if the issues specific to workers-as-women were initially treated in a somewhat secondary fashion (Interview No. 14). However, with the alleged practices aimed directly at controlling the bodies of women workers gone, there is currently less of a basis for women's groups to involve themselves in relation to the Novamed workers. Given this situation, the question can be raised as to what it is likely to take for women's groups to remain supportive.

One possibility would be that overt patriarchal practices are (re)introduced at Novamed, and that women's groups will mobilise on the same basis as they did before. However, given the public outrage previously caused by such practices, there is little to indicate that this will happen any time soon. Another possibility would be that the women workers at Novamed develop a feminist consciousness and join the broader social struggle against patriarchy, in which case women's groups could get engaged in solidarity based on 'feminist sisterhood'. However, there is little to indicate that the women workers at Novamed ever conceived of themselves as being subjected to male dominance during the industrial conflict and the contact between them and women's groups was largely discontinued after the strike. Although the Antalya Women's Counselling and Solidarity Centre co-organised a training session on 'women's body rights and reproductive health' for Novamed women workers in March 2009, it is too early to say if this will result in closer contact between them and local women's groups (Kaplan, 2009).

A third possibility would be that the relationship between Petrol-İş and women's groups develop to such an extent that they unite in a common struggle against the oppression of both workers and women. In this case, women's group support for Novamed workers *as* workers would go hand-in-hand with reciprocal Petrol-İş support in the broader struggle against patriarchy. In this connection, although Petrol-İş has become increasingly committed to organising women workers and improving their working conditions, this has yet to be understood in anti-patriarchal terms. While arguing that the 'patriarchal mentality' in Turkey constitutes an obstacle to organising – this, because 'not only the decision to work, but also the decision to become a union member, is not made by women on their own' (Petrol-İş, 2008: 29) – it contributed to reproduce it in the Novamed case. Furthermore, Petrol-İş is no less immune than most unions in Turkey to the charge that they are patriarchal institutions (Toksöz, 2002). Irrespective of it being the only union with a women's magazine in Turkey, Petrol-İş has yet to establish a women's committee or develop a clear policy related to women workers and their rights, and is completely male dominated at the top of its organisation. That said, it should in fairness be mentioned that Petrol-İş has established a separate budget for women that it launched a gender training programme in early 2009, and that women's committees have been established in a few branches.

It should also be noted that although Petrol-İş has come to see itself as being engaged in a broader struggle involving other social groups – with participation in the Turkish and European Social Forums, and its Administrative Board stressing that ‘[t]he new union understanding [implies] strategic cooperation with social movements in the fight against different forms of suppression’ (Petrol-İş, 2008: 4) – such social movement unionism has yet to be translated into practice in Turkey. While the ‘cooperation [with] the women’s liberation movement’ in the Novamed struggle is treated as an example of what is needed, the post-strike contact between Petrol-İş and this movement has been limited to a conference on ‘women labour confronting neo-liberal transformations’ being organised in its Istanbul facilities in April 2008, and Petrol-İş facilitating the previously mentioned training of Novamed women workers in March 2009. Against this background, it is currently much too early to say if a coalition of sorts will develop between Petrol-İş and women’s groups.<sup>6</sup>

### **Concluding remarks**

The present story of the women workers’ strike in Turkey’s Antalya Free Zone shows that solidarity can make a positive difference of great significance. Without the support of many people – including, not least, women’s groups and unions outside of Turkey – the outcome of the industrial conflict would likely have been much worse for the Novamed workers. That said, the case at hand also points to some significant challenges or limits related to solidarity across borders and social groups. While Petrol-İş has developed a quite internationalist understanding of the labour struggle, it is clear that some other unions remain much more caught up in national affairs or partnerships with employers and the state which, in turn, can place severe limits also on the strategies pursued by global union federations. Furthermore, although Petrol-İş has increasingly come to see itself engaged in a broader struggle involving also other social forces, much remains to be done both internally and externally if this is to develop into meaningful social movement unionism.

### **Interviews**

*Interview No. 1:* Ex-worker, Novamed; Antalya, 8 May 2008.

*Interview No. 2:* General Manager, Operational Manger, and Chief Financial Officer, Novamed; Antalya, 7 April 2010.

*Interview No. 3:* Worker, Novamed; Antalya, 10 May 2008.

*Interview No. 4:* Chief Financial Officer, Novamed; Antalya, 24 November 2008.

*Interview No. 5:* Lawyer, Petrol-İş; Istanbul, 8 February 2008.

*Interview No. 6:* Group of workers, Novamed; Antalya, 10 May 2008.

*Interview No. 7:* Journalist; Antalya, 19 November 2008.

*Interview No. 8:* President, Antalya Branch of the Chamber of Electrical Engineers; Antalya, 20 November 2008.

*Interview No. 9:* Union official, Petrol-İş; Antalya, 19 November 2008.

- Interview No. 10:* Head of International Department, IG BCE; telephone interview, 6 July 2009.
- Interview No. 11:* General Secretary, EMCEF; telephone interview, 7 September 2009.
- Interview No. 12:* Women activist and co-initiator of the Women's Platform for Solidarity with Novamed Strikers; Istanbul, 11 October 2008.
- Interview No. 13:* General Secretary, ICEM; telephone interview, 21 August 2009.
- Interview No. 14:* Editor, *Petrol-İş Kadın*; Istanbul, 10 October 2007.

## **Documents**

- Document No. 1:* Second Antalya Labour Court; E: 2005/947, K: 2005/486 (08/12/2005).
- Document No. 2:* High Supreme Court, Ninth Judicial Office; E: 2006/2004, K: 2006/2600 (06/02/2006).
- Document No. 3:* MLSS Antalya Regional Directorate, Formal Arbiter's Report; No.: B.13.0.ÇGM.1.03.07. (TİS.1507).76527.140.09/14788 (21/07/2006).
- Document No. 4:* Labour Inspectorate, Minutes of Strike Ballot; Case No.: 76527.07.01, SSN: 2.3910.011053290.07.01 (25/08/2006).
- Document No. 5:* First Antalya Labour Court; E: 2007/123, K: 2007/775 (16/08/2007).
- Document No. 6:* The Collective Agreement Signed by Novamed GmbH and Türkiye Petrol, Kimya, Lastik İşçileri Sendikası (Petrol-İş) valid from the date 01.01.2008 to the date 31.12.2010 (18/12/2007).
- Document No. 7:* Email from union official in Petrol-İş's International Department to authors (31/12/2008).
- Document No. 8:* Email from Head of IG BCE's International Department to authors (08/08/2009).
- Document No. 9:* Email from EMCEF union official to authors (06/07/2009).
- Document No. 10:* Email from union official in FEMCA-CISL's International Department to authors (10/09/2009).

## **Notes**

- 1 The analysis is based on a large number of semi-structured interviews with Novamed workers, the Novamed management, civil society actors in Antalya, women activists and union representatives, as well as media accounts and relevant documents – some of which re-printed in *Petrol-İş* (2008).
- 2 These allegations were rejected by the Novamed management at the time of the conflict (*Petrol-İş*, 2008:53), and have more recently been denounced as 'completely false accusations' (Interview No. 2).
- 3 The Novamed management has also denounced these allegations as 'completely false accusations' (Interview No. 2).
- 4 These claims were rejected by the Antalya Labour Court on 16 August 2007 (Document No. 5), and *Petrol-İş* withdrew its appeal of the decision when the industrial conflict was approaching a resolution (Interview No. 5).
- 5 For more details about the mobilisation and activities of women's groups, see Kurtoğlu and Fougner (2008).
- 6 For a much more in-depth discussion on some of the issues dealt with in this section, see Fougner and Kurtoğlu (forthcoming).