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A Social Democratic Party in Istanbul during the Post-Armistice Years

Erol Ülker

The future founder of the Social Democratic Party (Sosyal Demokrat Fırkası, SDF), Doctor Hasan Rıza's (bin Esat) relationship with the socialist movement began during the Second Constitutional Period.¹ A permanent member of the Medical Society, Dr. Hasan Rıza resigned from the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) with a letter he wrote in January 1911.² He subsequently adopted socialism, and in 1913–1914 contacted the Socialist International to inquire how to become a member of the organization.³ The SDF, however, was not established during this period, but following World War I, which ended in defeat for the Ottoman Empire. The socialist parties and groups founded at the beginning of the Second Constitutional Period could not survive in the authoritarian political atmosphere that emerged after the assassination of Mahmut Şevket Pasha in July 1913 and could only begin a reorganization process once the CUP government, which had been ruling unilaterally since January 1913, fell from power. At the end of 1918, the SDF was among the first leftist parties to emerge during this period.⁴ In addition to Dr. Hasan Rıza, who was listed as the leader of the party in its founding application, twelve other people are mentioned (fig. 1).⁵

The activities of the SDF during the post-Armistice period (1918–1922) provide important clues about the political and social atmosphere of the Ottoman capital, Istanbul, which had been under the occupation of the Allied forces since the end of 1918. In this political context where the CUP fell from power, the occupation forces gradually increased their control within the city, and a resistance movement organized by the Unionist cadres emerged, the SDF operated within a wide network. A series of reports written by the Ottoman authorities in the first half of 1919 refer to the Bolshevik and communist clusters that emerged in Istanbul and major centers of Anatolia.⁶ One of those reports, dated May 1919, emphasizes how a group of officers close to the Unionist leader Enver and his brother Nuri Pasha, who had been to the Caucasian quarters in Russia, began making propaganda for Bolshevism after returning to Ottoman lands. It is stated that the group, consisting of active duty and reserve officers, operated in cities such as Izmir and Bursa, and that its headquarters was in Istanbul. At the end of 1918, the group's members in Istanbul contacted the SDF, which was established under the leadership of Hasan Rıza.⁷

During the post-Armistice years, the occupied city of Istanbul was the backdrop to the activities of socialist and communist movements originating in Germany and Russia, which came into contact with the resistance movement on different “levels.” The Comintern and

1 Zafer Toprak, “Sosyal Demokrat Fırkası Reisi Hasan Rıza'nın Bir Risalesi. Sosyalizm; En Mühim ve Herkes İçin Mütalası Elzem Bir Mesele-i Hayatiyedir,” in Mete Tunçay, *Türkiye'de Sol Akımlar I* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2009), 217–231.

2 Tarihçi Zafer Tunaya, *Türkiye'de Siyasal Partiler. Cilt 1: İkinci Meşrutiyet Dönemi 1908–1918* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1998), 160; Tunçay, *Türkiye'de Sol Akımlar I*, 80, n. 47.

3 For Hasan Rıza's correspondence with the Socialist International see George Haupt and Paul Dumont, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda Sosyalist Hareketler* (Istanbul: Gözlem Yayınları, 1977), 181–188.

4 Regarding the foundation of the SDP, see “Sosyal Demokrat Fırkası,” *İleri*, December 21, 1918. Also see Tunçay, *Türkiye'de Sol Akımlar I*, 79–83; Tunaya, *Türkiye'de Siyasal Partiler. Cilt 2: Mütareke Dönemi, 1918–1922* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2008), 237–241.

5 Tunaya, *Türkiye'de Siyasal Partiler. Cilt 2*, 238.

6 The files in question have been collated in BOA, DH.KMS, 52-4/35 (3 Muharrem 1338 [September 28, 1919]).

7 “Polis Müdüriyet-i Umumiyesi'ne Tezkiye,” May 11, 1919. In the note dated May 7, sent to the Minister of Internal Affairs Mehmet Ali Bey, and signed “Governor İsmail from Gümülcine,” Dr. Ali Rıza was mentioned, but in the encrypted note dated May 10 and sent from the minister of internal affairs to “Governor of Hüdavendigâr İsmail Beyefendi,” it was stated that this was Dr. Hasan Rıza, not Dr. Ali Rıza. BOA, DH.KMS, 52-4/35 (3 Muharrem 1338 [September 28, 1919]). For a review of the documents in question, see Yunus Yılmaz, *Kurtuluş Savaşında İstanbullu ve Ankaralı Komünistler* (Istanbul: İleri Yayınları, 2014), 109–112. Yılmaz emphasizes that the aforementioned Hasan Rıza is the SDF leader Hasan Rıza.

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Figure 1: Dr. Hasan Rıza,
the chair of the SDF.
TÜSTAV Görsel/İşitsel
Arşiv Fonu.

the Bolsheviks attempted to establish a connection with the constituents of the resistance movement with a Unionist background on the one hand, and the leftist movements on the other. In this political context, various constituents that would later play significant roles in the socialist and communist movements in Turkey operated within the SDF. Ziyetullah Nuşirevan (Nevshirvanov) was one such member of the SDF during this period (fig. 2). He would later become one of the key figures of the (secret) Communist Party of Turkey that emerged in Anatolia in the early summer of 1920 in connection with the Turkish Communist Organization (Türk Komünist Teşkilatı, TKT), developed under the leadership of Mustafa Suphi in Russia, and then of the People's Socialist Party of Turkey (Türkiye Halk İştirakiyun Fırkası, THİF).⁸ A short article Nuşirevan wrote commemorating Ethem Nejat, who had been killed along with Mustafa Suphi in January 1923, mentions that there is a minority tendency within the SDF "supporting social reform and workers' interest."⁹

8 For Nuşirevan's Hafî TKP membership, see Erden Akbulut and Mete Tunçay, *Türkiye Halk İştirakiyun Fırkası (1920-1923)* (Istanbul: Sosyal Tarih Yayınları, 2007), 83; For his relations with THİF, see *ibid.*, 96-98.

9 Zenon - Zeynullah Nevşirvanov, "Ethem Nejat Arkadaş," in *Mustafa Suphi ve Yoldaşları. 28-29 Ocak 1921'i Unutma*, ed. Burhan Tuğsavul (Istanbul: Türkiye Sosyal Tarih Araştırma Vakfı, 2004), 113.

Figure 2: Ziyetullah Nuşirevan (Neuşirvanov) and his family. TÜSTAV Görsel/İşitsel Arşiv Fonu.



The SDF took an active role amongst the socialists in their attempts to put forward a joint candidate in the elections in 1919. To that end, many workers and socialists responded to the call of the Worker and Peasant Socialist Party of Turkey (Türkiye İşçi ve Çiftçi Sosyalist Fırkası, TİÇSF), founded by young workers and students who were in Germany during the war and returned to Istanbul after the armistice, and attended the meeting held in the Şehzadebaşı Ferah Theater on October 24, 1919. A wide range of delegates, from the Ottoman Craftsman Society to the Arsenal and Seyr-i Sefain factory workers to the bargemen and porters' association, were represented, along with TİÇSF members—some of whom also participated in the Spartakist uprising that broke out in Germany—were present at the meeting. This included an SDF representative, who made a short speech to convey his well wishes.¹⁰ In addition to

¹⁰ Ersoy Zengin, "Türkiye İşçi Hareketleri Tarihinde İmalat-ı Harbiye İşçileri," *Belgi* 13, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 458; "Seçim için İşçi Toplantısı," in *Kurtuluş. 1 Mayıs 1919-Şubat 1920, Türkiye İşçi ve Çiftçi Sosyalist Fırkası Organı*, ed. Rasih Nuri İleri (Istanbul: TÜSTAV Yayınları, 2007), 171-172.

130 the emphasis on the unity of socialists and workers, they protested the injustices created by the current two-stage electoral system and requested new law that acknowledged the equal, anonymous and proportional election procedure was made during the meeting.¹¹

The Union of Socialist Parties of Turkey was established shortly after this meeting on October 24, as a result of the decisions taken at the Ferah Theater a meeting was held to this end at the Yeni Bursa Kırathanesi (coffeehouse) near Çağaloğlu on October 28 (fig. 3).¹² “The Workers and Peasant Socialist Party of Turkey, the Social Democratic [Party], the Socialist Party of Turkey (Türkiye Sosyalist Fırkası, TSF), all the factories and shifts workshops in Dersaadet, and the executives from all the bargemen, boaters, salapuriers and crews’ associations gathered in Sirkeci yesterday and decided to convene to mobilize jointly under the title of the socialist union.”¹³ This union, which included several existing workers’ and labor organizations as well as TİÇSF, SDF, and TSF, was founded to “protect the interests of the entire proletariat of Istanbul, which exceeds 300 thousand individuals, and to ensure the success of their union.”¹⁴ However, it seems that the Socialist Union was soon disintegrated. According to Nuşirevan, the separatist and petty-bourgeois tendencies prevailing within the parties were the main reasons behind this disintegration.¹⁵ As a result, the socialist parties participated in the elections with their own candidates, and none of them was elected.

The SDF’s activities in occupied Istanbul were not limited to the attempts for elections and unification on the left. The party also played a prominent role in the labor movements that gained momentum during the post-Armistice period. Vanlı Kazım, one of the leading figures of the communist movement during this period, states in a report dated August 1922 that although the SDF “gathered a number of workers and civil servants during their initial periods,” an opposition emerged among the founders of the party, and as a result, the worker members departed the party.¹⁶ Based on the report by Vanlı Kazım, it can be said that a considerable mass of workers gathered around the SDF during this period. The report in question stated that there were approximately two thousand people already registered in the SDF’s books. After the December 1919 elections, there was a split in the SDF and the opposition group took a front against the existing party administration. About a year after the elections, that is, in mid-December 1920, this opposition group submitted a petition to the Ottoman government and demanded the annulment of the election results, claiming that there was corruption in the party’s executive committee elections.¹⁷ Upon this claim, the Police Directorate General initiated an investigation at the SDF headquarters, which revealed that the procedure followed by the party during the establishment process contradicted the Law of Associations. According to the relevant article of the law, the SDF had been required to add two copies of its internal regulations to the declaration submitted to the government in the process of its establishment however this requirement had not been fulfilled.

The news reflected in the Istanbul press show that the tensions within the SDF played an important role in bringing such issues to the government’s agenda. A report published in *İkdam* at the end of December 1920, stated, “in addition to a conflict which arose between the members of the SDF, the actions that had been taken until now were deemed to be null and void, and the administration was notified as such.”¹⁸ However, the SDF seems to have sur-

11 A press release dated November 19 sent to the French authorities states that at the meeting held at the Ferah Theater on October 31, Hilmi Bey, the chief editor of the *İdrak* newspaper, gave a speech on the importance of fighting against the current electoral system. However, the meeting at the Ferah Theater took place on October 24. Therefore, the aforementioned conference must have been organized by the TSF at the Şark Theater on October 31. Service Historique de l’Armée de Terre (SHAT), 20 N 167, SR Marine, 2e Bureau, 57/2, *Socialistes Turcs. Résumé*, November 19, 1919.

12 “Sosyalist Partileri Birliktir,” *İkdam*, October 30, 1919.

13 “Sosyalist Birliği,” *İleri*, October 29, 1919.

14 Ibid.

15 Zenon – Zeynullah Neşirvanov, “Ethem Nejat Arkadaş,” 113.

16 “İstanbul İşçi ve Sosyalist Teşkilatları Hal-i Hazır Harekatı,” Türkiye İnkılap Tarihi Enstitüsü Arşivleri (TITE), 61/46 (August 24, 1922). For a version of this report with some differences, see “İstanbul’da Sosyalist Fırkalarıyla İşçi Teşkilatlarının Bugünkü Hal ve Harekatı,” TÜSTAV Comintern Archives, cd: 24_25_b, file: 32_36, no. 361–365 (August 11, 1922).

17 “Sosyal Demokrat Fırkası Hakkında Derkenâr,” December 20, 1336. BOA, DH. HMŞ. 4/4 (6 Cemazeyilahir 1339 [February 15, 1921]).

18 Mete Tunçay, *Türkiye’de Sol Akımlar I*, 82.



Figure 3: “Sosyalist Birliđi” (“The Union of the Socialists”). A news article on the alliance of the leftist parties and workers’ associations. *İleri*, October 29, 1919. Atatürk Kitaplığı.

vived the process without being shut down. Referring to an article published in the *Alemdar* newspaper, Mete Tunçay emphasizes “Dr. Hasan Rıza [tried] at the beginning of 1921 to prevent intra-party conflicts and to generate new energy to the SDF.”¹⁹ The news article, dated January 24, noted, “*Muallim* [Teacher] Dr. Rıza has made an effort for the progress and honor of the party. The party program will be fully implemented, and arbitrary treatment of some members will be terminated.” Although the SDF was weakened by intra-party tensions and lost some of its members, it still maintained its position as a notable actor in the labor movement in the first half of 1922. In a letter addressed to the Socialist Workers’ International in May 1926, the party leader Hasan Rıza stated that “several” unions were officially formed after the foundation of the SDF.²⁰ SDF members played a very active role in the TSF congress convened in March 1922 and became part of the power struggles within the party.

During the post-Armistice period, especially after the official occupation on March 16, 1920, the TSF managed to rally many workers’ unions. It thus began to look like a labor confederation led by Hüseyin Hilmi, rather than a political party. Tram Company workers constituted the driving force of the labor movements on the rise in occupied Istanbul.²¹ The tramlines, which were electrified, modernized, and expanded during World War I became extremely important for urban transportation in Istanbul (fig. 4). The number of people employed in the Tram Company increased rapidly after the armistice, and a strike movement led by drivers in May 1920 resulted in success. Following this strike, tensions between the company and the workers remained an important item on the agenda of the Entente powers due to the importance of the tramlines for urban life in Istanbul.²² Their representatives made mediation attempts to resolve the disputes between the company and the workers, by holding meetings where each of these groups was represented.²³ Nevertheless, these efforts would not be enough to prevent the outbreak of a new strike movement.²⁴ The tram workers’ strike carried out between January 26 and February 6, 1922 under the leadership of the TSF, was defeated. During the strike, Hüseyin Hilmi, who had taken the title of permanent chair of the TSF, was arrested, and temporarily replaced by Pristina deputy Hamdi Bey.²⁵ The extraordinary congress of the TSF, which convened at the end of February, witnessed power struggles between different groups, including the SDF.

One of the organizations involved in these conflicts was the International Workers’ Union (Beynelmillel İşçiler İttihadı, Bİİ). It was a member of the Pofintern, which was affiliated to the Comintern. The majority of the Bİİ members were Greek-Orthodox workers. Roland Ginsberg, the leader of the Bİİ during the TSF congress, provides important details about the role of the SDF in a report he wrote to the Comintern Executive Committee in 1924. According to this report, Bİİ members played an important role in the faction struggle in the TSF congress that took place after the tram strike, in which the SDF also took an active part. The report states:

19 Ibid.

20 TÜSTAV – Orhan Silier Archive Fund (OSAF), OS_18/46 (May 27, 1926), 5.

21 For information about the tram workers and their relationship with the TSF, see Erol Ülker, “Mayıs 1920 Tramvay Grevi: Türkiye Sosyalist Fırkası ve İşçi Hareketi Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme,” *Kebikeç* 36 (2013): 243–258; Ülker, *Mütareke’nin İlk Yıllarında İstanbul’da Direniş ve Sol, 1918–1920* (Istanbul: Sosyal Tarih Yayınları, 2020), 96–109.

22 See Ülker, “Emperyalizm, İşgal ve İşçi Hareketi: Konstantinopol Tramvay ve Elektrik Şirketi in *Emperyalizm: Teorik ve Güncel Tartışmalar*, ed. Ahmet Bekmen and Barış Alp Özden (Istanbul: Habitus Kitap, 2016), 313–341.

23 For information on the development of relations between the company, the tram workers, and the Entente powers after the May 1920 strike, see Erol Ülker, “Mütareke İstanbul’unda Tramvay İşçileri Hareketi: Türkiye Sosyalist Fırkası, İşgal Makamları ve Radikaller,” *Tanzimat’tan Günümüze Türkiye İşçi Sınıfı Tarihi 1839–2014: Yeni Yaklaşımlar, Yeni Alanlar, Yeni Sorunlar* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2015), 206–230. Also see Serkan Tuna “Dersaadet Tramvay Amelesi Grevi (26 Ocak – 7 Şubat 1922),” *Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Dergisi* 33, no. 96 (2017): 90–93.

24 A point which needs to be emphasized here is that the Belgium-based Constantinople Tram and Electric Company, which the Istanbul Tram Company is an affiliate of, accuses the British authorities in Istanbul for behaving in a reckless manner against the excessive behaviors of the tram workers. FO 371/6577, “Tramways et Électricité de Constantinople” (July 15, 1921). The company management made an appeal to the Belgian government in this regard and requested that the British authorities be warned about this issue. For a review of correspondence on this topic, see Ülker, “Mütareke İstanbul’unda Tramvay,” 217–224.

25 “Amele Fırkasında,” *İkdam*, February 26, 1922; “Bizde Sosyalistlik,” *İkdam*, March 20, 1922.



It should be noted that during this conflict in the congress, the Turkish Social-Democratic Party made a great effort to win over some of the members of this party [TSF] and wanted to do so by relying on the Albanian constituents within the socialist party, which they dragged into conflict with the Turkish constituents. To this end, they had a leaflet printed, which they wanted to distribute. The Bİİ had a proletarian core within this party; this core forecasted the dangerous aims of the central committee and its chairman (freemason) Dr. Rıza and started to publish a daily newspaper titled *Energy (Enerji)*, upon obtaining permission from the French ambassador, General Pelle.²⁶

Figure 4: Istanbul public transport map, 1925. Burak Çetintaş Collection.

The TSF congress held after the tram strike, which in fact ended in defeat, was quite eventful. Şakir Rasim Bey, who had been expelled from the TSF during the tram strike and had not been accepted to the congress afterwards, had a Unionist background and had served as the vice-chairman of the TSF for some time. Şakir Rasim Bey, together with Rıza Bey and Kenan Bey, who had held important positions within the TSF, raided the congress and gave a statement despite Hamdi Bey's resistance.²⁷ This eventful congress, which was postponed in February with the intervention of a government representative, was repeated in March, and Şakir Rasim was elected as the chairman of the TSF.²⁸ If there is any truth to Ginsberg's account, the Bİİ was very active in this process. What is more significant for this essay is the information Ginsberg provides on the SDF. Indeed, Dr. Hasan Rıza seems to have been busy preparing a publication titled *Energy* during the congress. This initiative was also emphasized in his lengthy letter to the Socialist Workers' International.²⁹ Again, Ginsberg's claim that the SDF tried to influence the TSF congress indicates the party's significant influence especially among the organized workers of Albanian origin during the February–March

26 Akbulut and Tunçay, *Beynelmül İşçiler İttihadı: Mütareke İstanbulu'nda Rum Ağırlıklı Bir İşçi Örgütü ve TKP ile İlişkileri* (Istanbul: Sosyal Tarih Yayınları, 2009), 127.

27 "Amele Arasında. Sosyalist Fırkasında Dünkü İçtima," *İkdam*, February 28, 1922, 3; "Sosyalistler Arasında," *İkdam*, February 28, 1922.

28 "Amele Kongresi, *Tevhid-i Efkâr*, March 10, 1922.

29 TÜSTAV – OSAF, OS_18/46 (May 27, 1926), 6.

Figure 5: The May 1921 meeting of the tramline workers in Kağıthane, *Alemdar*, May, 8 1921. Atatürk Kitaplığı.



1922 period. However, Ginsberg adds that the SDF was disbanded within a month of the congress with the aid of the Bİİ core within the party. Indeed, we see that the SDF did not have much activity and prestige among workers during the May Day 1922 demonstrations. Although the SDF is one of the parties that played a role in the organization of May Day, it was reported that Dr. Hasan Rıza quickly walked away from the rally after making a short and timid speech during the demonstration.³⁰

After May 1, 1922, we come across the SDF in the news through a meeting in October that also included Refet (Bele) Pasha who set foot in Istanbul as the head of the mission representing the Ankara government. After the successful offensive in Anatolia, Pasha met with the representatives of workers and tradesmen while the administration of Istanbul was coming under control of the Ankara government. He met with the head of the SDF and one of its members on October 24. Noting that he “acted on behalf of all social democratic parties of Turkey and Russia,” Dr. Hasan Rıza congratulated Refet Pasha for the victory won by the People’s Government of Turkey.³¹ However, despite all its efforts, the SDF could not obtain the necessary permissions from the national government to continue its activities.³² In the following years, during the formative period of the republic, Dr. Hasan Rıza attempted to revive the party.³³ Finally, in 1946, Cemil Arif Alpay, member of the post-Armistice period cadres of the SDF, succeeded in establishing the Turkish Social Democratic Party as a continuation of the SDF, at a time when the Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP) trying to put distance from its political orientation that was far from the “left of center” line that it would adopt in the 1960s.

Translated by Neylan Bağcıoğlu

30 Akbulut and Tunçay, *Beynelmilal İşçiler İttihadi*, 135.

31 “Refet Paşa Hazretleri Amele ve Esnaf Heyetleri Arasında,” *Vakit*, 25 October 25, 1922.

32 TÜSTAV – OSAF, OS_18/46 (May 27, 1926), 5. For an analysis of the government’s relations with workers’ movements and organizations in the early years of the republic, see Fulya Apaydın and Erol Ülker, “The Political Incorporation of Labor in Turkey: Tracing the Origins of a Nationalist Path,” *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 5 (2021): 826–831.

33 Hasan İleri, *Türkiye’de Sosyal Demokrasi (1908–1998)* (Ankara: Gündüz Kitabevi Yayınları, 2011), 35–40.