

THE EFFECT OF UNIONS ON OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON ISSUES AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS WITH YOL-İŐ UNION REPRESENTATIVES¹

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ABSTRACT

Occupational health and safety is critically important for protecting the lives of employees and preventing workplace accidents. However, although workers are the group most affected by this process, their opportunities to be involved in the process are limited. This highlights the need for mechanisms that enable workers to contribute to occupational health and safety policies. Trade unions play a significant role in addressing this need and enhancing workplace safety and health practices. This study aims to understand the contributions of trade unions to occupational health and safety processes, identify the challenges encountered in these processes, and propose solutions to address these challenges. Interviews were conducted with a union's 7 workplace representatives affiliated with the Yol-İŐ Union and employed in the private sector, and the data obtained were analyzed using the content analysis method. It was found that unions contribute significantly to the occupational health and safety process, and they also support the process by conducting awareness-raising activities such as OHS-related training, translation of books, and distribution of brochures. To enhance effectiveness, it is necessary to add clauses to the Collective Labor Agreements that prioritize health and safety, empower representatives, and grant them authority and oversight in relation to occupational health and safety. It is also suggested as a solution proposal that labor unions should increase their workplace visits and address occupational health and safety issues during these visits.

Keywords: Union, Occupational Health and Safety, Workers' Representative.

JEL Codes: M12, M19, I12.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Occupational health and safety activities are those aiming to protect the health and safety of employees by preventing work accidents and occupational diseases. The key stakeholders playing both direct and indirect roles in legal and institutional strategies for occupational health and safety are the state, workers, and employers. These parties, despite having conflicting interests, bear significant responsibilities in ensuring occupational health and safety. The state is responsible for enacting and enforcing laws, whereas employers are responsible for conducting occupational health and safety activities, including complying with legal requirements, and workers are responsible for participating in these activities. The benefits derived from workplace occupational health and safety activities are distributed widely to all employees, while the total costs are concentrated on employers. Employers often tend to avoid these investments when they do not result in immediate financial returns, they fulfill only the safety and health requirements mandated by law. In this context, the reduction of work accidents and occupational diseases depends on the level of active effort exerted by the employer.

In practice, it is very difficult for workers to individually intervene in occupational health and safety activities that rely on the attitude of employers and managers in charge of workplace management. The effectiveness of strong unions, which are inherently capable of bargaining on behalf of workers and have a very powerful voice against employers, plays a vital role in this process. Therefore, the present study aims to determine the effect of unions on occupational health and safety and provide solutions to the problems in this area from the perspective of a union's workplace representatives. Accordingly, after the introduction section, the second section of this study explains the concepts of unions and occupational health and safety and explores their relationship. In the third section, relevant literature is reviewed, including pioneering studies that establish the relationship between occupational health and safety and unions. Finally, this study evaluates the effect of unions on occupational health and safety through a field study, presenting the findings with examples from participants' statements. Since no research evaluating the relationship between unions and occupational health and safety from the perspective of unions' workplace representatives could be found during the period of this study, the present study is believed to fill a significant gap in the literature and to have unique value in this regard.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Concept of Union

The process of unionization that dates back to the Industrial Revolution initially started with workers coming together under an association to protect and enhance their common interests. The concept of "union" first emerged in the 19th century when workers gathered under an institutional framework. In the 20th century, its influence was felt politically, socially, and economically, and all employees (except for white-collar workers) were involved in the course of time (Mahiroğulları, 2013).

Nowadays, unions have become the concept of “institutional structures representing the labor.” The concept has expanded further, and unions have become advocates of rights and freedoms, particularly in democratic countries (Özçelik, 2022).

The first comprehensive study on unions was carried out by Beatrice and Sidney Webb, in which unions were defined as a “*continuous association established by workers to improve working conditions*” (Clegg, 1978, cited in Koray, 1992: 83). In Türkiye, the labor union rights of employees are protected by Article 51 of the 1982 Constitution. In this article, a union is defined as “*legal entities established to protect and improve the economic and social conditions of their members.*” On the other hand, there also are different definitions of unions in the doctrine. Türk-İş defines a union as “*an organization formed to protect and defend the interests of a group of people*” (Türk-İş, 2011; 219), whereas Talas (1983) defined a union as “*a class-based and continuous organization that aims to improve the living and working conditions of workers.*” As defined by Topalhan (2015), a union is a *movement symbolizing workers’ collective awareness of protecting their professional and economic interests, created by the Industrial Revolution.* Başbuğ (2015) defined a union as “*a legal entity created by uniting knowledge and efforts to protect and improve common economic and social rights and benefits, apart from sharing profits among its members.*” According to Tuncay and Kutsal (2015), a union is defined as “*coming together to strengthen, solidarity to protect and improve common interests.*”

After the Industrial Revolution, unions strengthened from socioeconomic and political aspects over time and became influential across all sectors of society. Unions, which are effective in raising various issues such as poor working conditions to wages, are expected to be active in OHS (Occupational Health and Safety) matters outside the workplaces they are organized in. In countries such as India and Poland, unions inspect mines and even appoint labor inspectors. In Türkiye, there are approximately 917 labor inspectors. Even if these inspectors only inspect heavy and hazardous workplaces, it will take many years to inspect them. (Oğuz, 2015: 68-69; ÇSGB, 2023:16).

2.2. Concept of Occupational Health and Safety

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “*Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work.*” The right to work is considered a fundamental right and is constitutionally protected by Article 49 of the 1982 Constitution. Ensuring a healthy and safe working environment is a prerequisite for this fundamental right (İlhan and Ölmezoğlu, 2020: 12).

Since working life has a dynamic nature and is in constant change, particularly in Türkiye, it makes occupational health and safety (OHS) crucial for both employers and the government, not only due to the sociopolitical conditions regarding workplace accidents but also because of its economic consequences.

The World Health Organization and the International Labor Organization define Occupational Health and Safety as a field of science aiming to eliminate accident risks and place employees in suitable jobs in order to protect their social, professional, and mental well-being (Üngören and Koç, 2015). Tozkoparan and Taşoğlu (2011) described OHS as the systematic efforts aiming to create a healthy and safe work environment, protect employees from all types of risks, and prevent the hazards arising from working conditions and tools used, whereas Başbuğ and Bodur (2018) defined OHS as efforts to eliminate or minimize hazards arising from working conditions and use of tools and equipment in the workplace.

The conditions of being a worker, which are three times more dangerous than being a soldier, have not changed in the new century, and millions of workers continue to lose their lives in workplace accidents every year. While it is possible to eliminate risks in workplaces before they occur, workplace accidents continue to increase worldwide despite the rise in work standards and technological advancements (Yılmaz, 2010). Despite these negative trends worldwide, the situation in Türkiye regarding workplace accidents is far from satisfactory. In a research study carried out on the frequency of workplace accidents, Türkiye ranks first with a frequency of more than three times the average of 51 countries. The construction industry is the sector with the highest frequency of workplace accidents globally. Between 2010 and 2019, one out of every three fatal accidents and one out of every four non-fatal accidents occurred in the construction sector (İSİG Meclisi - OHS Council, 2023). Although the death rates in occupational accidents in the construction sector vary, they are 15%, 16%, 20% and 20% in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023, respectively. The mortality rate in occupational accidents rises to 26% in the first eight months of 2024 (İSİG Meclisi, 2024).

The probability of workplace accidents and occupational diseases in the construction industry is very high. The use of heavy machinery in construction work, dependency on tools, and the inherently dangerous nature of the work contribute to its “highly dangerous” nature. The labor-intensive nature of the industry, high turnover rates (SGK, 2023), frequent subcontracting, and informal employment, the need to establish a safety culture in workplaces, low educational levels among employees, and a lack of knowledge can also be mentioned as contributing factors. On the other hand, in the construction industry, work is project-based and often takes place away from the city or in a construction site environment. To meet project deadlines, work often continues on weekends. As stated by the participants who have worked in the construction sector and in the private sector for many years, including the head of the union branch, work continues with weekend work in order to get the works done on time. The high-intensity work tempo, with employees working more than 12 hours a day and exceeding 45 hours a week, leads to attention deficits that trigger workplace accidents in the construction industry.

2.3. The Roles and Responsibilities of Trade Unions in Establishing Occupational Health and Safety Occupational Health and Safety

The increase in workplace accidents and occupational diseases drew significant attention to occupational health and safety. Employers have a duty to protect and oversee their employees and it requires the implementation of all necessary precautions against potential adverse events in the workplace. Due to their interventions in workplace accidents and occupational diseases (such as legislation, inspection, rewards, penalties, etc.), governments have become the third pillar of industrial relations. Trade unions, on the other hand, have evolved to engage in activities aiming to protect, enhance the rights and interests of their members, and address workplace health and safety issues. This engagement with governmental institutions and organizations has led to institutionalization and the promotion of social dialogue in the course of the process. The tripartite system consisting of workers, employers, and the government has created a collective obligation to address the needs of occupational health and safety together.

One of the important intersections of social dialogue and cooperation is the establishment of occupational health and safety committees in workplaces. These committees have become crucial elements in contributing to occupational health and safety (OHS) inspections, preventing accidents before they occur, improving working conditions, safeguarding employee health, and fostering communication and industrial peace in workplaces.

Occupational Health and Safety Committees, initially introduced by Law No. 1475 and later expanded by the Occupational Health and Safety Law No. 6331, involve specific and comprehensive regulations. According to the Regulation on Occupational Health and Safety Committees, issued with reference to Law of Occupational Health and Safety No. 6331, “Employers are obliged to establish committees to engage in activities related to occupational health and safety in workplaces employing fifty or more employees and conducting continuous operations lasting more than six months.” These committees are required to convene monthly in high-risk workplaces, bi-monthly in medium-risk workplaces, and quarterly in low-risk workplaces. According to the relevant regulation, this committee should include a) the employer or employer representative, b) an occupational safety specialist, c) a workplace physician, d) an individual responsible for human resources, personnel, social affairs, or administrative and financial affairs, e) a civil defense specialist if available, f) a foreman, chief supervisor, or skilled worker if available, and g) a worker representative (the head representative participates in case of multiple workers’ representatives). The definition and selection process of the worker representative mentioned in item (g) are also separately regulated in the “Qualifications and Procedures for the Selection of Employee Representatives Related to Occupational Health and Safety” communiqué. According to the communiqué (Article 4/3), the employer must assign a union’s workplace representative as the employee representative if an authorized union or unions exist in the

workplace. Employee representatives are defined as individuals authorized to participate in OHS-related activities, monitor the work, request measures to eliminate hazards or reduce risks arising from dangers, make proposals, and represent employees in similar matters. In cases where unions exist, the union's workplace representative is also mandatory in these committees. The tasks of these committees include determining preventive measures to be taken in workplaces, investigating the causes of workplace accidents and hazardous situations, improving cooperation, planning OHS training, following legislation and standards, making recommendations regarding occupational hygiene, developing communication techniques, taking emergency measures, monitoring occupational diseases, conducting risk assessments, and identifying all factors affecting working conditions and specific risks of the workplace while preparing an annual report. Occupational health and safety committees are a significant mechanism that protects the rights of both employers and employees and enhances workplace productivity.

Unions exercise the rights granted to them by Law No. 6331 in the workplace; they appoint worker representatives to OHS Committees in the workplaces, where they are organized. They make recommendations for resolving issues on the agenda and contribute to the resolution of problems by monitoring the issues (Yol-İş, 2021). Unions, in collaboration with employers, take and implement regulatory measures within a framework for setting OHS goals, preventing hazards, and developing clear policies in the workplace, as well as improving and enhancing working conditions. Important issues like OHS should not be left solely to the employer (Akin, 2012). In this ongoing dynamic process, dialogue between the parties takes precedence. Effective inspections have the potential to significantly prevent workplace accidents and occupational diseases. In this regard, unions engaged in activities to solve their members' fundamental workplace problems, protect their rights, and improve working conditions hold a significant position in terms of occupational health and safety.

The Yol-İş Union organizes conferences in the context of the importance of the subject, translates books from different languages into Turkish, publishes books, and distributes brochures, in addition to conducting joint training sessions with employers.² The Yol-İş Union, in collaboration with the Construction Employers Union (İNTES), has established the "Türkiye Education Construction Site" and provided vocational training, including OHS, in the construction sector, along with hotel services, as part of numerous projects in the construction industry.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the field of occupational health and safety, among the primary stakeholders involved in the process, both directly and indirectly (including the government, workers, and employers), workers are the group most affected by health and safety hazards while having the least say. Workers' individual

² The sample book titles published by the Yol-İş Union are as follows: Duties, Authorities, and Responsibilities of Unions' Workplace Representatives; Occupational Health and Safety in the Construction Industry; Practices on Occupational Accidents and Occupational Diseases; Law on Occupational Health and Safety No. 6331 and Regulations; Fundamental Occupational Health and Safety Information for Workers' Representatives

involvement in the occupational health and safety process is very challenging. At this point, unions play a critical role in enabling workers to have a say in health and safety policies through organization and collective bargaining. There is limited research in the literature that emphasizes the importance of the critical role played by unions.

In a study carried out by Reilly, Paci, and Holl (1995), it was aimed to demonstrate the effect of unions on workplace accidents. The results of the Industrial Relations Survey conducted in the United Kingdom in 1990 revealed that union representatives made a positive contribution to the process in health and safety committees. In workplaces with health and safety committees organized by unions, fewer workplace accidents occurred when compared to workplaces without union organization.

In the study carried out by Alper and Demir (2007), the effectiveness of occupational health and safety committees in workplaces with union organization and in non-unionized enterprises in the textile and automotive sectors in Bursa province was comparatively examined. The research revealed that health and safety committees in the automotive sector had a more effective area of implementation when compared to the textile sector. In the textile sector, there were shortcomings in the awareness and implementation of health and safety committees among workers. In the automotive industry, there was greater trust in the committees among workers, and committee functions were adequately performed. In family-owned companies with underdeveloped corporate structures, health and safety committees had insufficient implementation.

Yılmaz (2010) carried out a study by conducting a survey on OHS experts in order to determine the effectiveness of health and safety committees, the status of compliance with obligations, and the opinions of experts regarding the reduction of workplace accidents. The study concluded that unions were beneficial in ensuring occupational health and safety in workplaces and had a positive impact on occupational health and safety levels. It also found that as workplaces became smaller, this effectiveness decreased, emphasizing the importance of dialogue and cooperation functions for committee effectiveness.

In a study carried out by Akın (2012), emphasis was placed on the importance of occupational health and safety and how unions could address occupational health and safety issues through collective bargaining at the workplace. The authors stated that unions could provide training, conduct inspections, and contribute to the formation of occupational health and safety policies nationwide due to their economic power and societal responsibility and that unions could contribute to the development of an occupational health and safety culture through scientifically qualified panels, conferences, meetings, symposiums, and practical training.

Tüzer (2012) conducted a survey in Istanbul in order to determine how construction companies implemented occupational health and safety measures, as well as the opinions and perspectives of workers and companies in the sector and the reasons for accidents.

In the study carried out by Şahin (2016), it was noted that unions took on roles in the socioeconomic protection of workers but were not actively involved in the field of occupational health

and safety in the historical process. It was expected that unions with a specific focus on occupational accidents could achieve the desired results in addressing workplace deficiencies and raising awareness of the occupational health and safety culture, both at the workplace level and in society.

In Demir's (2017) study carried out with union member workers in the defense and security sector using a survey method, it was concluded that Harb-İş Union's Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) culture development training had benefits for the workers.

In a study carried out by Güvel and Oral (2018), it was aimed to determine the extent to which occupational health and safety principles are implemented in the construction sector. For this purpose, a survey was conducted with employees from five different occupational groups participating in the study to investigate the level of implementation of occupational health and safety legal regulations in the Turkish construction sector.

Özbek (2019), in a study carried out with workers in the metal industry by using the survey method, reported that unions have a positive effect on both the formation and development of OHS policies and on exerting pressure on employers in this regard. The analysis, based on the sociodemographic characteristics of union member workers in the metal industry in Çorlu and descriptive statistics according to the Likert scale using SPSS 23 package program, revealed that unions are highly active and effective in the field of OHS.

Orhan (2019) emphasized the importance of technical measures in order to prevent workplace accidents and highlighted the significance of collaboration with employee representatives in occupational health and safety committees. Employee representatives who guide workers, facilitate communication and coordination between workers and employers, and convey their thoughts and views regarding occupational health and safety were discussed.

In a previous study carried out by Eser (2020), the role of unions in occupational health and safety and how they can become more active in this area and participate in the formulation of policies were addressed.

Using the survey method, Öngel (2022) aimed to determine how the general opinions of workers in the construction sector about OHS affect their perceptions of OHS activities in the workplace. The study concluded that employers should encourage greater involvement of workers in OHS activities, increase the provision of training, and identified union activities as the most significant factor influencing OHS.

In light of the literature discussed above, it is observed that research studies generally conceptualize the impact of unions on occupational health and safety in a limited manner. Therefore, approaching the study with unions' workplace representatives is believed to fill a significant gap in the literature.

4. STUDY METHOD

4.1. Study Design and Sample

In this study, conducted to determine the impact of unions on occupational health and safety and to evaluate the problems and solution proposals in this field, the semi-structured interview technique, one of the qualitative research methods, was utilized. The semi-structured interview technique provides more systematic and comparable information when conducted in accordance with a pre-prepared interview protocol, thanks to its specific level of standardization and flexibility (Türnüklü, 2000: 543). As Türnüklü stated, all of the predetermined questions were asked to all 7 participants in accordance with the interview protocol and a certain level of standardization was established. In the context of providing more systematic information, pre-prepared questions were asked in order to convey the experiences of the participants to the determined problem or subject; It was aimed to compare the opinions of 7 participants to the same question. While using the semi-structured interview technique, the participants were not directed, but they were also asked in-depth questions on the same topic in order to get the participant's opinion and clarify the issue when necessary. These flexibilities were used to enable 7 participants working at different construction sites and under different working conditions to convey their perspectives, experiences and suggestions on the same problem.

The sample of the study was determined using the criterion sampling method, a subtype of purposive sampling. In this method, participants are selected based on predetermined criteria that are thought to be significant for the study. In this context, the participants in the study were selected because they had extensive professional experience and had also served as union representatives for a long period, specifically within the Yol-İş Union.

4.2. Data Collection Tools

The data were obtained through interviews conducted by researchers after reviewing the relevant literature. The interview form was prepared by paying attention to ensure that the interview questions were clear, non-directive, and appropriate for the purpose. There are 2 questions in the interview form. Since the participants were living in different cities, appointments were made in advance, and the questions in the interview form, as presented in Table 1, were asked to the participants through telephone interviews. Moreover, participants who provided voluntary consent were given a general briefing about the research at the beginning of the interview; they were informed that the interview would be recorded, and assured that their personal information would remain confidential.

Table 1. Open-ended Questions Asked to Union Representatives

Q1. In general, what do you think about unions' effects on/contributions to the occupational health and safety? As a representative of your union in your workplace, how do you contribute to this process, and do you encounter any challenges, particularly in terms of participation in committees, while providing this contribution?

Q2. How can efficiency of unions be increased? What are your solution suggestions?

4.3. Data Analysis

In the present study, the content analysis method was utilized for the analysis of the data obtained. Content analysis is a research method that, according to Holsti, enables inferences to be made through the objective, systematic, and qualitative identification of the distinctive qualities of a study (cited in Herkner, 2003: 129). This method was used in order to facilitate the systematic examination of the issues encountered by unions' workplace representatives and the proposed solutions to these issues.

In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with union representatives to determine the impact of unions on occupational health and safety. The data obtained from these interviews were analyzed using content analysis, and as a result, two main themes were identified: "Evaluations Regarding the Effectiveness of Unions" and "Proposals for Increasing Effectiveness." The process of forming these themes was carried out as follows: Audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed into written texts and thoroughly examined. During the coding phase, participants' statements were carefully analyzed, and specific key phrases and concepts were coded. As a result of the coding process, similar or related codes were grouped together and categorized under two main themes.

The first theme, "Evaluations Regarding the Effectiveness of Unions," includes participants' assessments of the current roles of unions in occupational health and safety processes. This theme addresses the contributions of unions such as raising awareness, defending workers' rights, and supporting occupational health and safety practices. The second theme, "Proposals for Increasing Effectiveness," encompasses the suggestions made by participants to enhance the effectiveness of unions in occupational health and safety processes. This theme includes proposals such as organizing more training programs, strengthening the role of worker representatives, and increasing workplace visits.

4.4. Validity and Reliability of the Study

Validity and reliability in qualitative research differ from those in quantitative research methods. In terms of validity, qualitative research considers the detailed examination of every aspect of the problem as a criterion, while reliability is achieved through the consistency of the analysis processes (Sandelowski, 1986). In this study, the data collected in accordance with qualitative research methods were thoroughly examined and coded using the thematic analysis approach. To ensure the consistency of the codes, collaboration with a single expert was undertaken during the analysis process.

This expert is an academic with extensive experience in the field of occupational health and safety and is proficient in qualitative research methodologies. During the data coding process, the data were first meticulously reviewed, and initial codes were identified. Subsequently, these codes were reviewed by the expert to assess their alignment with the data. Based on the expert's feedback, necessary adjustments were made to the codes to ensure their consistency with the data. This process enhanced the objectivity and accuracy of the coding procedure, thereby reinforcing the reliability of the analyses.

5. RESULTS

In this section, the findings obtained through interviews with union representatives, aiming to determine the effect of unions on occupational health and safety, are presented. Demographic information of the interviewed participants, such as gender, age, educational background, professional experience, and their experiences as union or workers representatives, as well as workplace-related data such as sector, total number of employees, and total number of representatives, are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Interviewed Participants

Participants	Gender	Age	Education Level	Experience	Occupational Experience of Union Representative	Total Number of Employees	Title	Industry
K1	E	59	Technical High School	41 years	7 years	650	Head Representative	Construction (Tunnel)
K2	E	40	Technical High School	25 years	2 years	421	Head Representative	Construction (Support Services)
K3	E	41	University	13 years	10 years	40	Head Representative	Construction (Highway)
K4	E	47	Secondary School	25 years	6 years	700	Representative	Construction (Highway)
K5	E	47	Secondary School	10 years	1 year	60	Representative	Construction (Metro)
K6	E	69	University	41 years	15 years	1500	Head Representative	Construction (Airport)
K7	E	59	High School	41 years	16 years	800	Head Representative	Construction (Dam)

The participants consist of voluntary union representatives who work in private sector workplaces affiliated with the Yol-İş Union and have agreed to participate in the study. As indicated in Table 2, two of the union representatives are involved in road construction, while the others are engaged in airport construction, tunnel construction, metro construction, dam construction, and support services. The

representatives, who were interviewed, work in İstanbul, Artvin, Çanakkale, and Yozgat, and all of the representatives are male.

A total of 7 participants with ages ranging between 40 and 69 years were interviewed. Participants have a minimum of 10 years of experience, with 13 years of experience for 1 participant, 25 years of experience for 2 participants, and 41 years of experience for 3 participants. Five of the union representatives in private sector workplaces affiliated with the Yol-İş Union in Türkiye serve as chief representatives.

5.1. Perspective of Union Representatives on the Contribution of Unions to Occupational Health and Safety, and the Practices of Yol-İş Union

In line with the themes discussed in the previous sections, this part thoroughly examines the views of union representatives regarding the contribution of unions to occupational health and safety (OHS) processes. These perspectives provide valuable insights into how unions influence and enhance OHS practices within the workplace. To summarize this comprehensive evaluation, **Table 3** presents a detailed overview of the representatives' opinions on the contributions of unions to OHS activities.

Table 3. Opinions of Workplace Representatives of Unions on Unions' Contribution to OHS Activities

	Number of Statements
Participation in OHS Committees (Expressing employees' issues through union representatives in committees)	7
Auditing and Oversight (Following PPEs originating from the Law of OHS and rights originating from Labor Law such as working hours and extra hours)	6
Quick Solutions to Problems (Prompt action taken in response to employees' issues conveyed to union representatives)	5
Training and Organizational Activities (Planning and implementation of workplace-specific training and organizational activities organized by the union)	2
Pressure (Exerting pressure on employers for the improvement of working conditions)	4

Examining Table 3, it can be seen that unions make their most significant contributions to occupational health and safety efforts through their workplace representatives. Workplace representatives of unions make this contribution by voicing the problems of employees on behalf of the union in committees, monitoring the suitability of Personal Protective Equipment used by employees for occupational health and safety, and tracking the usage status of workers. They also contribute to ensuring quick solutions to employees' problems outside of committee meeting times. In addition, it is observed that the union's planning and execution of education and organizational activities specific to the workplace, the distribution of books and brochures printed by the union, and exerting pressure on employers for the improvement of working conditions contribute to the process.

Regarding **the participation of participants in OHS Committees**, K6 stated, "We have meetings every month, and when we go there, for example, I report deficiencies in terms of food, and they promptly

address them because we report these problems by asking our workers, and they try to solve them.” K1 also mentioned, *“Our employees communicate their problems to us, and we raise their issues in the monthly OHS Committee meetings,”* indicating that they are in communication with unions’ workplace representatives for the resolution of employees’ issues. On the other hand, participants were also questioned about the effectiveness of OHS committees. Firstly, it was inquired whether the committees met at the intervals specified in the law (monthly for very hazardous, every two months for hazardous, and every three months for less hazardous classes) and then whether participants actively attended committee meetings as unions’ workplace representatives. 85% of the participants stated that the committees met at the intervals specified in the law and that they actively participated in these meetings. However, one participant (K2) stated, *“The OHS committee needs to be more prominent. Our OHS committee meeting hasn’t been held for two months because the quorum couldn’t be achieved. If there’s any other meeting within themselves, they somehow manage to hold it, but when it comes to OHS, they take a step back and they don’t consider it important. The working hours and working days of the doctor, who comes this workplace, are not communicated to us, which is actually a deficiency. In every aspect, regarding OHS, all information from A to Z should be given to the representatives because all employees come to the representative first and ask questions, and we should be able to answer them easily.”* This statement indicates that, although the committees meet, they do not do so regularly, and this is a matter that needs to be addressed in terms of the effectiveness of the committees, even if there is a union presence. In addition, K7 also made a critical comment about the effectiveness of the committees, stating, *“The purpose of OHS committees is really good, but it would be better if they could operate more efficiently and healthily without the initiative of the employer in workplace practices.”*

Participants state that they contribute to issues originating from the Occupational Health and Safety Law, such as **following** Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) and **monitoring** rights arising from the Labor Law, such as working hours and overtime, as unions’ workplace representatives. K1 clearly stated, *“We also check the suitability of PPE for occupational health and safety. For instance, a few months ago, protective glasses were changed. There were complaints about the glasses; they said that the glasses were fogging up and they couldn’t see effectively, and that the glasses were scratched and they weren’t good glasses. So, we immediately reported it to the OHS management and the procurement department, and they replaced them with quality glasses. They are quite satisfied now.”*

On the other hand, it was observed that unions’ workplace representatives contribute to the occupational health and safety process outside of committee meetings too. K1 expressed his thoughts on finding **quick solutions to problems**, saying, *“As Yol-İş Union, we are very effective in immediately conveying our members’ and employees’ demands to the relevant authorities, thus resolving them as soon as possible.”* K6 provided an example of finding quick solutions to problems by stating, *“Once, we had a bedbug problem at our construction site. I immediately took it to the committee, and they promptly took care of it. They changed the beds, brought in an external pest control company, and after that,*

there were some complaints about the food, so we reported that, and they fixed it right away. They appreciate us because we provide support as a union, and they look favorably upon us. So, they cooperate with us on all issues with the employer.”

Another contribution to the occupational health and safety process comes through **education and organizational activities**. In this regard, it is observed that training sessions organized by the union are planned and conducted through unions’ workplace representatives, considering workplace working hours. K6, representing Yol-İş Union, emphasizes the quantity and quality of organized training activities, stating, “*We have given many seminars here. As Yol-İş Union, we have about 6 construction sites here, and we provided occupational health and personal development seminars to workers. We brought in external instructors. Yol-İş Union was our sponsor union, and we provided training to approximately 3000-4000 people, I think.*” K1 adds, “*We participate in education programs and provide necessary information; we do this together with the Occupational Health and Safety management. We request what our worker friends and members need, and we participate in training activities at the hours convenient for them. Additionally, we distribute the books and brochures translated by the union to our friends.*”

In the evaluations made specifically within the context of the Yol-İş union, it was determined that unions contribute to improving the working conditions and terms of employees’ work health and safety activities by exerting **pressure** on employers. In this regard, participant K4 stated, “*...most importantly, our unions exert pressure on matters such as clothing and working hours, and in my opinion, the union contributes significantly in this regard.*” Participant K6 reiterated the union’s contribution to the process with the words, “*Of course, being a union member is completely different. You may ask why. As I mentioned, we listen to all of the workers’ problems. As the chief representative, I am always in dialogue with upper management and the employer. In case of any problem that workers cannot directly convey, I can at least convey these problems to the management. I have worked in non-union places as well, where whatever the boss said was final, and workers had no say. But when there’s a union, the situation is different.*”

2. Solution Suggestions of Unions' Workplace Representatives on Increasing the Efficiency of Unions

Table 4. Solution Suggestions of Unions' Workplace Representatives on Increasing the Efficiency of Unions

	Number of Statements
Provisions that strengthen the position of union representatives and include more OHS provisions should be added to CLAs.	5
Care should be taken to select educated individuals as union representatives, and training should be provided to union representatives.	3
Independent occupational safety experts should be employed in unions and workplaces	3
Unions should offer training on independent OHS issues, independent of the workplace	3
Unions should increase the number of workplace visits and carry out awareness-raising activities.	2
Environment and conditions that allow workers' representatives can convey the problems should be established.	2
Collaboration should be made with fellow unions.	1

When unions' workplace representatives were asked about the effect of unions on occupational health and safety, it was generally determined that they contributed positively to the process. However, it was also inquired whether they found this contribution sufficient. It was found that the participants did not find this contribution sufficient. When asked what should be done to increase effectiveness for those who did not find it sufficient, most participants stated that **provisions related to occupational health and safety should be added to collective labor agreements, strengthening the position of unions' workplace representatives**. In this regard, K7 mentioned, *"The union representative must stand firmly behind the representative because the representative is the one who experiences the problems in the field, so the better the representative feels, the more influential they become. If we support the representative, they will put in more effort and work harder."* Similarly, K4 expressed a similar view, *"The workers' representative must be strong, not just in terms of money or anything like that, because they are defending the rights of people, so it's always important for them to be strong. I mean, they have to be strong themselves to empower the employees. It won't work if they are weak or unsupported, because they are helping people."* Participants also emphasized **the importance of selecting educated individuals as unions' workplace representatives and providing training to them** while strengthening their position. For example, K3 expressed his opinion, *"Empowering the union representative through personnel training would contribute significantly."* Regarding the addition

of provisions in collective labor agreements, for example, Participant 2 and Participant 3 stated, “*It would be good to add clauses to the collective labor agreement because everyone needs to be informed about these issues,*” and “*Since there is an occupational health and safety law, union agreements are somewhat in the background. There aren’t many additions to the agreements. It mainly focuses on personal protective clothing and equipment. However, unions need to remind and guide people in this regard. It’s not enough to just have the occupational health and safety law; there should be guidance and information provided.*”

Another proposed solution for effectiveness was the **employment of independent occupational safety experts** in unions and workplaces. In this regard, K3 stated, “*Actually, unions should also have occupational safety experts. Not just employers. If unions have occupational safety experts, it would make unions stronger when it comes to adding provisions to collective labor agreements and conducting workplace visits in terms of occupational safety,*” and a similar emphasis was made by K4 and K7. K4 mentioned, “*For example, an occupational safety expert was assigned here by the company. I saw them once on the field, walking around, but I haven’t seen them for about 3-4 months. It would be good if they occasionally visited us, the employee representatives, and informed the employees.*” K7 also added, “*As OHS experts, we should constantly be in dialogue with the workers’ representatives so that they can get rid of the perception of OHS experts who constantly penalize them and report them to the employer in case of an accident. For this purpose, the OHS experts should not receive a salary from the employer and should be independent.*”

Another solution proposed to enhance effectiveness is for labor unions to **offer OHS training independently from workplaces**. Participants K1 and K5 respectively state on this matter, “*Workers should be provided with more training in order to expand awareness of OHS*” and “*Unions can empower and assist their members in this regard by offering more training and conducting meetings*” (K5).

Participants emphasize that **increasing the number of union’s visits to workplaces and conducting awareness-raising activities** are essential to boost effectiveness. Regarding this, K1 suggests, “*They should frequently meet with workers through their representatives, and even if not everywhere, they should hold meetings in workplaces to raise awareness*”, whereas K3 mentions, “*Most of the time, when they visit, they discuss financial matters or rights, the rights that need to be claimed. I think that, when they visit, they should allocate at least 10 minutes to occupational health and safety matters. Actually, when union officials visit workplaces, it would be more effective if a safety expert spoke for 10 minutes*” to underline the importance of unions addressing OHS issues during their visits.

Given the statements of the participants, it was determined that **creating the environment and conditions where union representatives can listen to the workers’ problems** will positively contribute to enhancing effectiveness. In this regard, K2 mentions, “*Ninety percent of us go to the field, they leave at 9AM and return around 4PM. We can only reach them by messages or phone calls. It*

would be good if an environment or condition is provided where we can come together, which can be anytime, even outside work.” It was observed that K6 initially faced difficulties in meeting with other workers as a representative but overcame the issue later. K6 states, “When we first came here, we didn’t even have a place for coffee. Of course, over time, we took care of everything we needed and negotiated with the employers. Now we have our football field, a billiards hall, our own lounge, and even a market. We went and discussed everything we needed. If such places are available in other workplaces, workers will be more comfortable expressing their problems, and awareness-raising activities can be carried out more easily.”

One participant has a different perspective on enhancing effectiveness and suggests that **collaborating with fellow unions from other sectors** would positively contribute to the process. In this regard, he mentioned, “We need to improve our relationships with fellow unions in different industries in the same city. Fellow unions in the same city can bring their workers together, take them to places like an OHS-related fair, organize trips together, provide refreshments, explore the place, and explain. It would be good to have such events. Moreover, we can visit their construction sites and we can bring them to our construction sites. Such events would be nice, especially if there is an OHS-related fair.”

6. CONCLUSION

In this study, the effects of unions on occupational health and safety processes were examined from the perspective of workplace representatives. The findings were evaluated by considering the factors influencing the effectiveness of unions, as well as the challenges faced and proposed solutions. The results of the study provide significant insights that contribute to the development of occupational health and safety culture in our country. In this study, where the impact of unions on occupational health and safety is attempted to be determined through union representatives, two main themes have been reached: “Assessments regarding the effectiveness of unions” and “Proposals for raising effectiveness”.

In this study, first, questions regarding the contributions of unions to occupational health and safety and the effectiveness of these contributions were directed to unions’ workplace representatives. Within the scope of the first theme, it was determined that unions made a significant contribution to the occupational health and safety process through unions’ workplace representatives. In addition to this, it was also found that they supported the process by conducting awareness-raising activities such as publishing books, distributing brochures, providing education, and organizing OHS-related events. Similarly, Özbek (2019) also carried out a study on workers in the metal industry by using a survey method. It was determined in that study that unions have positive effects both in the development and improvement of OHS policies and in applying pressure on employers on this issue. Furthermore, some participants, who had also worked in non-unionized workplaces, mentioned that there were many differences between working in unionized and non-unionized workplaces. Participants stated that in unionized workplaces, they made requests within the framework of contract rules on issues such as

changes in working hours or overtime demands from employers. It was noted that contract conditions were not strictly adhered to in non-unionized workplaces. On the other hand, participants also mentioned that employees paid more attention to occupational safety rules with the belief that they were being monitored, and this fact significantly contributed to reducing workplace accidents and occupational diseases.

On the other hand, during the in-depth interviews conducted with the participants, the statements of participants revealed that more effort is needed regarding effectiveness. At this point, participants were asked what should be done to increase effectiveness. When the responses were analyzed, it was found that adding clauses empowering representatives with sanction and control authority in Collective Labor Agreements and incorporating clauses that prioritize health and safety would contribute to the process in terms of increasing effectiveness. Orhan (2019) emphasized the importance of technical measures in preventing workplace accidents in addition to cooperation with employee representatives in occupational health and safety committees, highlighting the role of employee representatives who guide employees, facilitate communication and coordination between workers and employers, and convey their thoughts and opinions on occupational health and safety (Orhan, 2019). Furthermore, in content analysis, it was suggested as another solution proposal that unions should increase workplace visits, addressing occupational health and safety issues during these visits. It was also found that the effectiveness of unions could be enhanced by organizing more awareness-raising training activities for their members and representatives, preferably employing independent occupational safety experts, and collaborating with fellow unions. Şahin (2016) also achieved results similar to the present study. The author emphasized the need for unions to make a greater contribution to occupational health and safety efforts, highlighting the important role of unions in protecting workers socio-economically and expecting them to make efforts to reduce workplace accidents. The importance of occupational health and safety was emphasized also in a study carried out by Akın (2012), suggesting that unions could address OHS issues through collective labor agreements, conduct training and inspections in workplaces, and contribute to the development of OHS policies nationwide with their economic power and social responsibility. It was also noted that unions, with their experiences and potential power, could contribute to the development of an OHS culture through scientifically qualified panels, conferences, meetings, symposiums, and practical training.

Finally, since the research results were only obtained from the Yol-İş union's workplace representatives in private sector workplaces, it is recommended that future researchers carry out qualitative and quantitative studies that include public sector and other private sector workplaces affiliated with different unions in this regard.

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