

The Family Wage Form and the Real Subsumption of Kurdish Farmworkers in Turkish Agriculture

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Abstract

Kurdish migrant workers from the Kurdish region of Turkey (Northern Kurdistan) and Syrian refugees make up the majority of Turkey's agricultural labor force. While it is a form of wage labour, the structure of production and the organization of labour is based on the worker family rather than the individual worker. In this arrangement, workers are recruited by labour contractors as families, most tasks are assigned to family units, labour control and discipline and payments are organized through gender and age hierarchies within the family. Workers are also housed as families in makeshift accommodations with limited amenities, while women shoulder the intensified reproductive labour required to sustain children, the elderly, and other family members as wage workers. This family-based organization of labor became hegemonic after the war between Kurdish guerrillas and the Turkish state displaced and dispossessed Kurdish rural populations in the 1990s. Drawing on 20 months of ethnographic research analyzed through Marxist debates on real subsumption, I argue that family wage labor is a specific form of abstraction of labor, which has both productive and social reproductive functions. Through this abstraction, the family unit becomes not only a site of surplus value production but also the locus of a gendered and racialized collective subjectivity, through which the worker experiences the antagonistic relation between Turkish capital and Kurdish labor as well as the colonial violence structuring Turkish society. Rather than treating the Kurdish migrant worker family as a remnant of the peasant household or "traditional" kinship relations, I understand it as a historically specific labor form produced through dispossession, political violence, and the resulting modality of capitalist production. This labor form was extended refugee families who fled the Syrian War and settled in Turkey after 2011.

Keywords

Kurdish migrant farmworkers, real subsumption, social reproduction, Turkey.