The Partial Success of Return Incentives for Guest Workers (December 14, 1974)

Abstract

During the recession that followed the first oil crisis, many Turkish workers accepted monetary incentives to return to their homeland. They did so because they feared deportation and had insufficient knowledge of German social safety nets. Incentives were offered by individual companies such as the Ford Automobile Works in Cologne.

Source

Extremely Anxious, Many Turks Are Accepting Severance Pay and Signing Their Resignations

By this weekend, about two thousand workers, most of them Turks, had "voluntarily" resigned from their jobs at the Ford automobile factory. On December 6, the Federal Economics Minister was told in a telex from the Ford Automobile Works in Cologne that workers are being offered severance packages to resign voluntarily; on account of poor sales, the company apparently has a surplus of 4,500 to 5,000 employees.

On Tuesday of this week, a memorandum was circulated in the main plant in Cologne and in two smaller plants in Düren and Wülfrath. It offered unskilled workers, semi-skilled workers, and specialists severance packages of DM 4,500, DM 6,000, or DM 7,500 to resign from their positions (with the DM 7,500 payments being for people who have worked there for more than five years). The concluding portion of the memo stated that mass layoffs would be otherwise unavoidable. The offer is good until January 15, 1975. On Friday, after negotiations, the offer of voluntary resignation was also extended to white-collar employees, most of whom are German.

On Wednesday and Thursday, it was surprising to see how quickly workers reacted, apparently accepting the offer without even thinking about it. At noontime on Wednesday, the Ford administration still believed that the 10,000 Turks employed at the Cologne plant, in particular, would wait until Christmas to discuss the matter with their families.

After the shift, in a Ford dormitory for Turkish workers: no one in a group that had hastily converged to discuss the matter had previously heard anything about severance packages, but many had feared this scenario after hearing about similar offers in other automobile factories. Therefore, according to various accounts, fear shot up like a fever curve in the dormitories. People signed their resignations spontaneously because "everyone is convinced" that foreigners would be the first to go in mass layoffs.

"My fear grew every day," said young Ragip Durmutz, who has been living here for two years and who had previously planned to bring his wife and children over. He is taking the DM 4,500 and wants to go back to Turkey soon. Soyen Kadir, 28 years old, single, also signed. After four years at Ford, he will get a payout of DM 6,000. Additionally, he will start receiving unemployment benefits after a short period, but he isn't sure about all the details. First off, he wants "to spend all the money and travel around Germany," then "go home and look for a job in the civil service."

A forty-three-year-old former public-health worker in Turkey who worked at Ford for ten years (but who, out of fear and shame, doesn't want his name to be printed here) accepted the DM 7,500 offer: "I'll go like a dog." He described the last few months as martyrdom, explaining that a German foreman kept pressing

him to continually increase production on the assembly line. On top of this came the increasingly perceptible hostility in the city. “I think I’ve sunk lower every day.” If he cannot return to his civil-service position in Turkey, he wants to support his large family with agriculture. He said he has saved enough money for a tractor.

All the Turks participating in the conversation had heard from television and newspaper reports that foreigners would be let go before Germans, but they had not heard this from colleagues at Ford. No one is familiar with the phrase “social plan” [*Sozialplan*], nor does anyone have the slightest idea what this plan means in the context of the announced mass layoffs.

Udo Reinhold, a Ford plant spokesman, refers to this social plan at Ford. In the event of layoffs, Reinhold says, the company will follow guidelines established by the works council [*Betriebsrat*] years ago; these guidelines state that actions must be undertaken without regard to skin color or nationality. Decisions would be made according to “social points” [*Sozialpunkten*], such as marital status, number of children, seniority, and age protection. Accordingly, a German with two children would be laid off before a Turk with four children, provided that their point total was otherwise equal.

Reinhold says that reduced hours have helped “make ends meet” at Ford. The planned cuts—meaning the roughly 5,000 voluntary or non-voluntary terminations—are supposed to save the remaining jobs.

At the Workers’ Welfare Association (AWO) office in Cologne, the counseling agency for Turks, Abdullah Kocabiyik believes that his compatriots at Ford accepted severance packages in a frightened panic only because they thought they would be laid off anyway. Ninety percent of them, Kocabiyik said, knew nothing about the social plan, and it was never explained in conjunction with the information they received this week. There are, he said, no new employment opportunities for Turks—either in Cologne or in other cities—except in mining. Half of those who just resigned at Ford will probably accept work in the mines, Kocabiyik said. In the dormitory, however, the Turks assured me that they would not go into mining. They would rather seek work “above ground” in Turkey.

“The number of available jobs in mining is declining, but we still have 229 open.” This is what the employment office in Gelsenkirchen said in response to an inquiry. At the moment, the Hugo coal mine is “like a magnet,” the office said, attracting unemployed foreign workers from automobile factories, because the mine also offers dormitory accommodations. But most of the Turks from the automobile industry do not speak German, and “good German” is a requirement for mining work.

Staff members at the Cologne employment office look calmly upon the possible wave of unemployed Turkish autoworkers. Thus far, roughly 3,000 of the 12,000 unemployed workers registered at this office are foreigners (out of a total of 450,000 workers, including 65,000 foreigners). Director Heinz Fetten and personnel manager Alfred Iser say that unemployed Germans are given priority over foreigners for job placements. No action will be taken in cases where foreigners with expired residence permits still hold jobs. And decisions will continue to be made “on the basis of reasonable criteria.” If Ford laid off Germans before foreigners in accordance with the social plan, then this, the office said, would be a matter for the collective bargaining agents, and the employment office would have no legal grounds to function as arbiter. They are relieved by the certainty of this, in case such a situation arises. As to whether Germans will have to yield their jobs to foreigners—this will probably never be put to a test. Motivated by fear, the Turks have already made this decision for the Germans.

Source: Key L. Ulrich, “In großer Sorge nehmen viele Türken die Abfindung und unterschreiben ihre Kündigung,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,* December 14, 1974, p. 5. © All rights reserved.

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