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Trade Union Monitor Cyprus

POLITICAL, ECONOMICAL AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

Ever since a Greek coup and an ensuing Turkish invasion in 1974, the island of Cyprus has been divided into two parts. The Greek Cypriot community lives south of the dividing line in the internationally recognised Republic of Cyprus. The Turkish Cypriots live in the north in the internationally not recognised “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)”.¹

The complete deadlock in the negotiations on a solution over the Cyprus issue continued in 2023 and 2024. This situation has prevailed since the failure of the last round of talks to reunify the island at an international conference in Crans Montana, Switzerland, in July 2017.

The demand by Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot leader, Ersin Tatar, to recognize TRNC sovereign equality and equal international status as a precondition for resuming negotiations remains the main obstacle. This position con-

flicted with the internationally accepted framework of a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation for a solution. The Greek Cypriot president Nikos Christodoulides, called for increased EU involvement to help overcome the deadlock, however the Turkish side rejects this proposal. Concurrently, while officially president Christodoulides supports negotiations within the framework a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation, his credibility has been questioned because of his past hard-line positions and backing from parties known for their tough stance on the Cyprus problem.

In October 2020, the Turkish Cypriot authorities unilaterally opened parts of Varosha, a fenced-off suburb of Famagusta uninhabited since 1974 and previously administered by the Turkish military. This move, in violation of UN Security Council resolutions, was widely condemned by the international community, as it shifted control of the area to the Turkish Cypriot authorities. Turkey stated it would allow the return of Greek Cypriot property owners if recognized by the Immovable Property Commission in the north. By the end of 2024, 3.5% of the territory had been opened, but no residents have returned.

¹ The “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)” is only recognised by the Republic of Turkey. While for Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots, Ersin Tatar serves as President of the TRNC, the international community considers him the communal leader of the Turkish Cypriots. Because the government of the Republic of Cyprus remains internationally recognised as the government of the whole of the island, the entire island is now considered to be a member of the European Union. However, the Acquis Communautaire is suspended in northern Cyprus pending a political settlement to the Cyprus problem (see Protocol no. 10 of the Accession Treaty).

Further tensions arose in 2023 over a Turkish Cypriot plan to build a road linking Arsos/Yiğitler to Pyla/Pile, a mixed village in the UN buffer zone. UN peacekeepers attempting to halt the unauthorized works were physically confronted, injuring three persons. The incident drew sharp criticism from the UN and EU, though Turkey supported the Turkish Cypriot stance. A UN-mediated compromise allowed both the road construction and Greek Cypriot development projects under UNFICYP oversight. However, by November 2023, work had stalled again over renewed objections, with negotiations ongoing.

In late 2023, Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar accepted the appointment of María Angela Holguín Cuéllar as the UN Secretary-General's personal envoy. Although she engaged in separate talks with both sides and proposed a trilateral meeting, this was initially rejected by Tatar. Holguín's mandate was not extended beyond its original six-month term, and her July 2024 report concluded that the two sides remain far from a compromise. UN Secretary-General António Guterres also raised concerns about growing militarisation in the buffer zone, warning it jeopardized UNFICYP's mission.

In October 2024, Guterres hosted an informal dinner with Cypriot leaders in New York. They agreed to explore multilateral talks on the commencement of negotiations involving guarantor powers and possible new crossing openings.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL SITUATION

Greek Cypriots

The economy of the Republic of Cyprus remains predominantly service based. The services sector—especially tourism, financial services, and real estate—contributes nearly 80% of GDP. Industry and agriculture accounted for 10% and 2%, respectively. Following steady growth after the 2013 financial crisis, the economy contracted in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with tourism—a key sector—declining by over 84%. A partial recovery began in 2021. Growth moderated to 2.4% in 2023, due to weaker external demand for financial services, but rose again to 3.4% in 2024 and is projected to reach 3.2% in 2025.

Inflation peaked at 8.1% in 2022, driven by the war in Ukraine and post-pandemic supply disruptions, but declined to 3.9% in 2023 and 2.3% in 2024, with structural inflation also easing. Unemployment fell steadily, reaching below 5% in 2024. While public, private, and external debt levels remain high, they have been on a declining trend. However, rising interest rates have intensified financial stress, particularly for households.

Social indicators show moderate improvement: the share of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion declined to 17.1% in 2024 (from 17.4% in 2023), with a persistent gender gap—18.5% for women versus 15.6% for men. In

2022, the Republic introduced a national minimum wage, which was modestly increased in 2024 following negotiations with social partners.

Turkish Cypriots

In northern Cyprus, economic conditions have been shaped by high inflation and the sustained depreciation of the Turkish lira, driving a severe cost-of-living crisis. Nonetheless, economic recovery outpaced expectations. Following a deep recession in 2020, GDP rebounded modestly in 2021, grew by 13.3% in 2022, and over 5% in 2023. The services sector—particularly trade, tourism, and education—led the recovery.

An important dynamic has been the sharp rise in cross-border activity, as residents of the south took advantage of lower prices in the north due to currency depreciation. -Despite structural vulnerabilities, the increased cross-border interaction and return of foreign students have provided short-term stability to the Turkish Cypriot economy.

Despite ongoing economic expansion in northern Cyprus, significant challenges persist, particularly for Turkish Cypriots employed in the private sector and for migrant workers in low-wage jobs. High inflation remains the primary obstacle to maintaining living standards. Although inflation declined from a peak of 94.5% in 2022 to 83.6% in 2023 and further to 53.3% in 2024, it remained well above international price stability thresholds. In contrast, public sector employees—whose wages are indexed to inflation—and individuals with incomes in hard currencies were comparatively shielded from these pressures.

Real GDP growth reached 7.3% in 2023, with a projected 5.4% growth in 2024, according to the State Planning Organisation. Central Bank reports indicated robust economic activity, highlighted by significant increases in employment, tourism, and cross-border mobility.

A notable demographic shift occurred because the sharp cost-of-living increase in hard currency terms led many foreign residents and students to leave. Particularly alarming was the steep decline in Nigerian students—down from 12,842 in 2022 to just 2,973 in 2024—raising concerns about the long-term viability of the higher education sector, a key driver of the northern economy.

Labour market indicators were mixed. Official social security registrations increased from approximately 127,000 in 2022 to 159,000 in 2024. Notably, 48.1% of registered workers were TRNC citizens, with the remainder split between Turkish nationals (27.7%) and other foreign nationals (24.2%). However, 7.6% of the workforce remained informally employed. The unemployment rate stood at 5.1%, with youth unemployment reaching 14.9%.

The budget deficit widened significantly, from TL 263 million (€8.1 million) in 2023 to TL 9.6 billion (€260.9 million) in 2024. Excluding financial support from Türkiye, locally gen-

erated revenue covered only 74.1% of expenditures in 2024, down from 85.7% in the previous year. Domestic debt also rose sharply, from TL 786.2 million (€24.1 million) at the end of 2023 to TL 6.1 billion (€158 million) by the close of 2024.

TRADE UNION CONTEXT

Greek Cypriots

The newly elected government in 2023 faced enduring socio-economic challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical instability, and domestic policy disputes. Although economic activity remained resilient—partly unaffected by external conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East—the labour market was shaped by high inflation, evolving wage policies, and mounting pressures for social dialogue.

A central issue was the contentious Cost-of-Living Allowance (COLA) mechanism. While legally mandated for public employees, its application in the private sector remains conditional upon collective agreements. Disputes over COLA's relevance led to significant industrial action in early 2023, including a nationwide general strike. A revised agreement in May 2023 increased COLA payments from 50% to 66.67% of annual CPI growth, effective until June 2025. Employers continued to advocate for its abolition, citing economic inefficiency, while trade unions demanded full reinstatement and warned of further mobilisation.

The statutory minimum wage framework was also revised in 2024. Monthly minimum wages increased by 1.7% (€900 for new employees) and 6.4% (€1,000 for employees after six months), but demands for hourly rates and broader inclusion remained unaddressed. Key worker categories—including domestic and agricultural workers—remained excluded, and employers were still permitted wage reductions for food and accommodation provisions.

Tensions over Third Country Nationals (TCNs) also intensified. A government strategy implemented in 2023, enacted without social dialogue, failed to satisfy either employers, who demanded liberalised recruitment, or trade unions, who insisted on strict adherence to collective agreements and legal compliance. The absence of consensus stalled meaningful reforms.

Meanwhile, the renewal of critical collective agreements in sectors such as construction and hospitality brought some progress. Notably, 2024 saw Cyprus's longest-ever industrial action—a 30-day strike in the ready-mix concrete sector—end with significant worker gains. Another milestone was the first-ever collective agreement in the fleet management sector across Europe, secured by platform workers (primarily TCNs) employed indirectly by Wolt.

In terms of legislation, 2023 saw major developments: the Teleworking Law introduced employee cost reimbursement

and the “right to disconnect”; the Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions Law enhanced contract transparency and reduced probation periods; and the Maternity Protection Law was amended in 2024 to expand leave entitlements. In addition, Cyprus ratified the ILO Convention on the Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work and strengthened penalties against undeclared employment.

Despite the active role of the Labour Advisory Body in pre-empting conflict, unresolved issues persist. These include the future of COLA, comprehensive pension reform, enhanced regulation of minimum wages, legislative protection for the right to strike in essential services, and ratification of ILO Convention C189 for domestic workers. Social dialogue remains critical for advancing labour protections and maintaining industrial peace.

Turkish Cypriots

In 2023 and 2024, Turkish Cypriot trade unions played a central role in socio-economic advocacy amidst worsening inflation, public discontent, and weakening institutional trust. The five principal public-sector unions—Cyprus Turkish Public Officials Trade Union (KTAMS), Cyprus Turkish Primary School Teachers Union (KTÖS) and Cyprus Turkish Secondary School Teachers Union (KTOEÖS), Cyprus Turkish Public Officials Trade Union (Kamu-Sen), and Public Workers Trade Union (Kamu-İş)—spearheaded widespread mobilization, including coordinated strikes, demonstrations, and policy proposals, to defend wages, demand better public services, and resist government reforms perceived as eroding labour rights. KTAMS consistently publicized hunger-line data to highlight the inadequacy of wages against the rising cost of living.

The three trade union federations, particularly Hür-İş, influenced key government decisions, such as increasing the frequency of cost-of-living allowance (COLA) payments and reversing proposed legal amendments undermining collective bargaining. Minimum wage adjustments—occurring thrice in 2024 for the first time in years—brought significant, if uneven, gains for private-sector workers. Nevertheless, union proposals for legal reforms to link minimum wage directly to inflation and to revise the composition of the Minimum Wage Determination Commission were largely ignored.

Sector-specific unions were also active. Teachers' unions KTÖS and KTOEÖS prioritized school safety and educational equity, staging multiple strikes in response to seismic risks, inadequate infrastructure, and the unresourced expansion of full-day schooling. Healthcare unions highlighted a deepening crisis marked by understaffing, medicine shortages, and budgetary neglect, culminating in protest strikes and public condemnations.

Meanwhile, El-Sen, the electricity workers' union, maintained high visibility through protests, targeted power disconnections, and legal actions. Their resistance centered

on alleged corruption within Kib-Tek, threats of privatization, and unresolved infrastructural and financial crises. Controversial staff appointments and clashes with the government over unpaid institutional debts further escalated tensions. El-Sen also opposed the undersea interconnector project linking northern Cyprus with Turkey's grid, citing sovereignty and transparency concerns.

Unions also raised alarms over government manipulation of inflation data, inadequate statistical methodology, and the erosion of institutional independence, especially concerning the Statistics Institute. These issues fuelled broader political critiques, including calls for the government's resignation and protests over political interference in education and auditing.

Overall, the period was marked by sustained, multi-sectoral union activism aimed at countering the socioeconomic fallout of inflation, resisting authoritarian policy trends, and defending institutional integrity in northern Cyprus.

TRADE UNIONS IN CYPRUS – FACTS AND FIGURES

HISTORICAL ASPECTS

Greek Cypriots

In the aftermath of the 1974 war, Cyprus saw the strengthening and formalisation of its tripartite work relations system—an arrangement involving workers, employers, and the state that had existed in rudimentary form since colonial times. Though not legally binding, the 1962 “Basic Agreement” marked the first formal articulation of this model, introducing a framework for dispute resolution based on free collective bargaining. This was further codified in the 1977 Industrial Relations Code (IRC), a soft law document still in force today, which aligns with key ILO conventions and outlines procedures for mediation and arbitration.

A core feature of the Cypriot system is its reliance on collective bargaining, which, under the IRC, lacks legal enforceability. The state plays only an advisory role, intervening through the Ministry of Labour's mediation service. There is no mechanism to legally extend collective agreements to non-unionised workers, and newly hired employees are not automatically covered.

During the 1980s and 1990s, trade unions participated in various tripartite committees, gaining influence in policy areas but often adopting conciliatory positions. Their involvement did not extend to broader economic policymaking. Politically, unions remained closely aligned with parties: PEO with the Communist Progressive Party of the Working People (AKEL), SEK with center-right Democratic Rally (DISY) and center Democratic Party (DIKO), and DEOK with the social democratic Movement for Social De-

mocracy (EDEK). Despite growing in size and resources, unions functioned as extensions of their affiliated parties.

From the 1990s, Cyprus's economy became increasingly globalised, with manufacturing declining and services expanding—especially after EU accession in 2004. Although union membership grew, it failed to keep pace with labour force expansion, leading to a decline in density from around 80% in the 1980s to 50% by the 2010s. Non-Cypriot, youth, and service sector workers remained difficult to organise. These challenges, along with rising precarious employment, have limited unionisation efforts in recent years.

Turkish Cypriots

Although the roots of Turkish Cypriot trade unions can be traced back to the 1940s, the trade union movement had played only a subservient role in the Turkish Cypriot community until 1974, because right-wing nationalists dominated the politico-economic scene in this period of intercommunal conflict. The ethnic tension and then conflict between the two communities, which started in the 1950s, hindered economic modernisation and development of modern institutions, including trade unions. In this respect, the de facto geographical division of the island in 1974 and the establishment of a separate Turkish Cypriot political entity in 1975 marks an important milestone. Though the establishment of some major trade unions, such as KTAMS (Cyprus Turkish Public Officials Trade Union), KTÖS (Cyprus Turkish Primary School Teachers Union) and KTOEÖS (Cyprus Turkish Secondary School Teachers Union), and one of the federations, Türk-Sen (Federation of Cyprus Turkish Trade Unions), had preceded 1974, the circumstances in small enclaves, where Turkish Cypriots lived under military rule, were not conducive to class-based unionism. Therefore, unionism gained momentum only in the post-1974 period.

In this early post-conflict period, there was only small-scale production in the private sector and the state was the biggest employer. State economic enterprises were active in tourism and manufacturing, where the scale was conducive to unionisation. These factors explain the dominance of the public sector trade unions.

Due to the positive atmosphere of the early post-1974 period and inspired by the relative strength of the left in Turkey, the parliament passed many working-class-friendly laws, empowering the trade unions (at least in the public sector). Consequently, in 1981, when the total employment figure was around 54,000, there were around 20,000 union members. Yet the union membership could not sustain this figure for a very long time; even though the total employment figure reached 90,000 in 2001, the number of trade union members was still around the 1981 level. By 2023, there were around 27,000 union members while the number of people registered with the social security system was approximately 141,000.

TRADE UNION LANDSCAPE

Greek Cypriots

The gradual but substantial expansion of the broader public sector allowed the centre-conservative SEK to catch up with PEO in terms of membership, as it organised the overwhelming majority of employees in the public services and municipalities. At the same time, the Pancyprrian Union of Civil Servants (PASYDY), representing the civil servants properly, was also strengthened, expanding in membership and attaining a series of wage increases and benefits for its members.

PASYDY is formally politically neutral and is not affiliated with any particular party, yet, as the majority of its members are DIKO and DISY supporters, it usually leans politically towards the right. Party members and party officials are active within the civil service and within PASYDY, although this does not take the form of formalised internal factions, such as those operating in the public sector teachers' unions: Pancyprrian Organisation of Greek Teachers (POED), Organisation of Greek Secondary Education Teachers (OELMEK) and Organisation of Teachers in Technical Institutions (OLTEK), representing the primary, secondary and technical education, respectively.

Most important trade union federations in the Republic of Cyprus

Tab. 1

Trade Union Federation	Chairperson and Vice Chairperson	Members	International Memberships
Παγκύπρια Εργατική Ομοσπονδία (ΠΕΟ) Pancyprrian Labour Federation (PEO)	Chair: Soteroulla Charalambous Vice-Chair: Michalis Papanikolaou	57,912 (2024)	WFTU
Συνομοσπονδία Εργαζομένων Κύπρου (ΣΕΚ) Confederation of working persons in Cyprus (SEK)	Chair: Andreas Matsas Vice-Chair: Michalis Michael	62,620 (2024)	ITUC, ETUC
Παγκύπρια συνδικαλιστική οργάνωση δημοσίων υπαλλήλων (ΠΑΣΥΔΥ) Pancyprrian Trade Union of Civil Servants (PASYDY)	Chair: Stratis Mathaiou Vice-Chair: Antonis Koutsoullis	22,396(2024)	ETUC, EPSU, PSI

Most important branch or individual unions in the Republic of Cyprus

Tab. 2

Branch or Individual Union	Membership in Federation	Chairperson and Vice Chairperson	Members	International Memberships
Συντεχνία Οικοδόμων, Ξυλουργών, μεταλλωρύχων και γενικών εργατών (Οικοδόμοι) Trade union of builders, carpenters, miners and general workers (Builders)	PEO	Chair: Michalis Papanikolaou Vice-Chair: Eftihios Papamichael	14,652 (2024)	UITBB
Συντεχνία Ξενοδοχούπαλλήλων και Κέντρων Αναψυχής (ΣΥΞΚΑ) Trade union of hotel and leisure centre workers (SYXKA)	PEO	Chair: Lefteris Georgiadis Vice-Chair: Andreas Kombos	13,290 (2024)	TUI-HOTOUR
Ομοσπονδία Σωματείων Ημικρατικών Οργανισμών (ΟΗΟ) Federation of unions of Semi-governmental Organisations (OIO)	SEK	Chair: Andreas Elia Vice-Chair: Ilias Demetriou	7,264 (2024)	EPSU, PSI
Ομοσπονδία Υπαλλήλων Ξενοδοχείων. Επισιτισμού και Κέντρων Αναψυχής ΟΥΞΕΚΑ Federation of hotel, food and leisure centre employees (OIXEKA)	SEK	Chair: Miltiadis Miltiadous Vice-Chair: Georgios Karas	18,667 (2024)	EFFAT, IUF
Ένωση Τραπεζικών Υπαλλήλων Κύπρου ΕΤΥΚ Union of Cyprus Bank Employees (ETYK)	Independent	Chair: Chatzikostis Loizos Vice-Chair: Christos Konomis	7,443 (2024)	UNI Europa, UNI Global
Παγκύπρια Ομοσπονδία Ανεξάρτητων Συνδικαλιστικών Οργανώσεων ΠΟΑΣΟ Pancyprrian Federation of Independent Trade Union Organisations (POASO)	Independent	Chair: Kostas Ioannou Vice-Chair: Achilleas Charalampous	App. 3,637 (2024)	WOW

The Union of Banking Employees of Cyprus (ETYK), is like PASYDY in the sense that it is not formally aligned with any political party, and, in fact, it was able to benefit from the substantial expansion of the banking system and its strong labour market position, achieving considerable wage raises, benefits and privileges for its members in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s.

The expansion of irregular employment in the broader public sector in the 2000s and the inability of PASYDY as well as SEK to largely protect these workers, despite achieving some improvements, has led to the formation of other small, independent unions. The biggest of these, Anexartiti Sintehnia Dimosion Ypallilon Kyprou (ASDYK, Independent Union of Civil Servants of Cyprus), emerged in the 2010s as a second general public sector union; the Pancyprian Association of Government Doctors (PASIKY), and the Pancyprian Nursing Association (PASYNO) all challenged PASYDY. More recently, the trade union Pancypriot Union Equality (ISOTITA) was formed to represent irregularly employed workers in both the public and semi-public sectors.

In October 2020, the Pancyprian Organisation of Independent Trade Unions (POAS), founded in 1956, was renamed the Pan-Cypriot Federation of Independent Trade Union Organisations (POASO) after the inclusion of the unions ASDYK and PASYNO. Today eight trade unions are member of POASO, with approximately 4,000 members.

In the 2010s, the big trade unions suffered losses in membership but remained the dominant players, as the trade union landscape had not been extensively altered.

Trade union representation varies enormously depending on the sector of economic activity and enterprise size. In the public, semi-public, municipal and banking sectors, trade union density remains very high, although not as high as it used to be, as union membership for the regularly employed has been traditionally almost automatic upon employment. Exceptions to this are those who have top administrative and managerial positions, professionals, and regular as well as project-based employees who hold fixed-term work posts. Other factors that have changed membership numbers are the increase in the number of irregular workers, the increase in young employees with successive temporary contracts., and the withdrawal of some employees and occupational groups from PASYDY and, to a smaller extent, from SEK, as mentioned above.

In the private sector, the main trend is for most big firms to have a trade union presence and for most small ones to be without a trade union presence. Such is the case for hotels and restaurants and construction companies, where trade unions are relatively strong and negotiate industry-wide collective agreements. There are, however, some big employers in these industries that manage to keep the trade unions out of their businesses. Trade unions have faced increasing difficulties in the last decade even in these two industries, which are relatively large and very dynamic, and,

along with the banking sector, drive the whole economy. Construction was severely hit by the crisis and shrank substantially in the crisis years, but currently it has been re-generated. Tourism was the only industry that continued to grow during the crisis, but the prevailing conditions in the economy did not allow the trade unions to sustain the pre-crisis employment conditions, although some steps have been taken in the last years to improve both conditions and representation.

In the transport and manufacturing sectors, there is a moderate trade union presence and a mixture of industrial- and enterprise-level collective agreements, which cover a small section of the workforce, but also serve as a reference point for some other non-unionised enterprises. In retail trade and services trade, union presence has always been and remains limited. Collective agreements are very rare in these sectors, and when there are agreements, they do not extend beyond the enterprise level. In the absence of collective agreements, the only tool left for trade unions is labour legislation and advocating for a minimum wage, where applicable.

In transnational enterprises, unionisation tends to be rarer, because of anti-union policies usually adopted in sectors such as fast-food chains, and because of the prevalence of more individualist ideologies in, for example, multinational professional services.

The formal EU definition for small and medium enterprises is not very analytically useful for a small country such as Cyprus, as the overwhelming majority of enterprises fall into that category. However, the trend is that unionisation is more difficult in small, often extended-family businesses compared to medium-sized ones.

Turkish Cypriots

Historical and structural factors, such as the very small scale of industrial production, and the small size of private enterprises, rendered unionisation in the private sector very difficult. Consequently, the level of unionisation is very low in the private sector. According to a study conducted in 2014, there were no trade union members in 95 per cent of the privately-owned workplaces. Therefore, an overwhelming majority of the union members work in the public and semi-public sectors. Trade union density is in decline, whereas it was around 33.7 per cent in 2004, it was around 22 per cent in 2022.

The trade union landscape in the northern part of Cyprus is quite fragmented. According to the Registrar of Trade Unions, there were around 45 active trade unions in 2022. By law, 20 people may come together to form a union. Unionists consider this as a deliberate strategy adopted by politicians to undermine the development of larger and more influential unions because in practice rather than joining larger existing sectoral unions and pooling resources, employees prefer to set up a new union and lead it.

Until very recently, the union scene is dominated by three major union federations organised in the public and semi-public sectors, and several independent unions in public administration, primary and secondary public education, and municipalities. In 2024, KTAMS (Union of Turkish Cypriot Public Servants) and the Cooperative Workers Union Koop-Sen formed a new umbrella organization—the Cy-

prus Federation of Workers' and Employees' Trade Unions (KİEF), becoming the fourth trade union federation in the country. The union leaders announced their collaboration to advocate for the rights of workers, employees, and pensioners, and invited other unions to join the collective effort. KİEF held its first meeting on October 7.

Most important trade union federations in north Cyprus

Tab. 3

Trade Union Federation	Chairperson and Vice Chairperson	Members	International Memberships
Hür İşçi Sendikaları Federasyonu, Hür-İş (Federation of Free Trade Unions)	Chair: Ahmet Serdaroğlu Secretary General: Ali Yeltekin	4,460	None
Kıbrıs Türk İşçi Sendikaları Federasyonu, Türk-Sen (Federation of Cyprus Turkish Trade Unions)	Arslan Bıçaklı (Chairperson) Secretary General: Tamay Soysan	1,699	ETUC, ITUC
Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Federasyonu, Dev-İş (Federation of Revolutionary Trade Unions)	Chair: Semih Kolozali Secretary General: Doğukan Akdeniz	1,091	WFTU
Kıbrıs İşçi ve Emekçileri Sendikaları Federasyonu, KİEF, (the Cyprus Federation of Workers' and Employees' Trade Unions)	Chair: Güven Bengihan Secretary General: Rifat Tuğsal	4,530	

Most important branch or individual unions in north Cyprus

Tab. 4

Branch or Individual Union	Membership in Federation	Chairperson and Vice Chairperson	Members	International Memberships
Kıbrıs Türk Öğretmenler Sendikası, KTÖS (Cyprus Turkish Primary School Teachers Union, KTOEOS)	Independent	Chair: Mustafa Baybora Secretary General: Burak Maviş	1,768	EI, ETUCE
Kıbrıs Türk Orta Eğitim Öğretmenler Sendikası, KTOEÖS (Cyprus Turkish Secondary School Teachers Union)	Independent	Chair: Selma Eylem Secretary General: Tahir Gökçebel	3,143	EI, ETUCE
Kıbrıs Türk Amme Memurları Sendikası, KTAMS (Union of Turkish Cypriot Public Servants)	KİEF	Chair: Güven Bengihan Secretary General: Serhan Yiğit	3,851	EPSU, PSI
Kıbrıs Türk Kamu Görevlileri Sendikası, Kamu-Sen (Cyprus Turkish Public Officials Trade Union)	Independent	Chair: Metin Atan Secretary General: Özgür Kıdrışlıoğlu	2,265	None
Kamu İşçileri Sendikası, (Kamu-İş) (Public Workers Trade Union)	Hür-İş	Chair: Ahmet Serdaroğlu Secretary General: Devrim Gündüz	2,893	International Eurasian Metal Workers' Federation (IEMF)
Belediye Emekçileri Sendikası (Municipal Workers Trade Union)	Independent	Chair: Mustafa Yalınkaya Secretary General: Mithat Arsu	1,842	None

WORKING CONDITIONS OF TRADE UNIONS

Greek Cypriots

There are no significant direct legal obstacles limiting the ability of trade unions to act properly. The right to unionise and the right to strike are protected by the Constitution and trade union legislation. Furthermore, the trade union law of 2012, “On the recognition of trade union organisation and the right of trade union facilitation for the purpose of recognition for collective bargaining”, has improved the situation for unions by establishing a procedure to overcome an employer’s refusal to grant recognition through a decree by the Trade Union Registrar. Previously, the only option was full-fledged industrial action to try to force the employer to back down. The high cost and high risk of this action often have dissuaded unions from embarking on such a course.

With the 2012 law, the Trade Union Registrar may, at the union’s request, directly issue a decree of obligatory recognition if, at a firm employing more than 30 people, unions represent at least 50 per cent of the employees. If unions represent at least 25 per cent, the Trade Union Registrar may organise a secret ballot on the firm’s premises without the employer’s presence. The result of the ballot, whether for union representation or not, shall be valid with a simple majority if 40 per cent or more of the employees participate. The law has also allowed trade unionists easier access to workplaces and has allocated more time for shop stewards to perform their union duties.

Although the operationalisation of the Registrar’s new powers has happened only four times since 2012, the mere existence of the law has partly helped unionisation efforts by both established and new trade unions, as the requirements for recognition are clearly defined and legally secured in advance.

All the eight fundamental ILO Conventions and three out of the four governance Conventions have been ratified by the Republic of Cyprus and are currently in force. The Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention, 1969 (No.129) remains unratified. Of the technical Conventions, 45 out of 177 are ratified. In general, Cyprus has ratified 58 Conventions and four Protocols: 50 are in force; six Conventions and two Protocols have been denounced; four instruments have been abrogated and one has been ratified in the past 12 months.

Turkish Cypriots

The right to establish trade unions and the right to collective agreement and to strike are protected by the Turkish Cypriot constitution of 1985 (Article 53 and Article 54).

The Trade Unions Law was introduced in 1971 and has not been subject to amendment since 1974. Though it needs to be updated, trade unions are reluctant to lobby for it, as they are worried about possible negative consequences. One of their main concerns is the probable elimination of

the check-off system, under which the employer deducts the union membership fee from employees’ wages and pays it directly to the trade unions; something which is mooted by right-wing politicians from time to time to undermine the strength of trade unions.

Trade unions do not have any problem organising in the public sector. Indeed, an overwhelming number of the unionised labour force works in the public or semi-public sector.

On the other hand, it can be said that private sector employees in general and the immigrant workforce in particular work in precarious conditions. Although only a limited number of ILO conventions has been ratified by the Turkish Cypriot parliament, the Labour Law from 1992, which regulates labour relations in the private sector, is considered reasonable by unionists. However, there are serious problems in the enforcement of this legislation. To give an example, on different occasions, many employees working in the private sector had been fired after joining a trade union although this is clearly in violation of the law.

There are serious shortcomings in the enforcement of the labour safety legislation, too. Deadly workplace accidents are common particularly in the construction sector.

TRADE UNIONS AND THEIR CORE TASKS

Greek Cypriots

In the Republic of Cyprus, collective bargaining occurs primarily at two levels: industrial and enterprise. These levels operate independently, without formal coordination. While there is no national, cross-industry, or regional bargaining, some major collective agreements and public sector standards informally influence others. Sectoral bargaining is typically led by PEO and SEK for workers and OEB for employers, while enterprise-level agreements are negotiated directly, sometimes with support from employer associations.

National-level agreements exist but function more as general policy statements than binding instruments. Collective bargaining coverage stands at approximately 40%, closely mirroring union density, due to the absence of extension mechanisms and “erga omnes” rules. As union density declined from 63.4% in 2001 to 43.3% in 2016, bargaining coverage similarly fell. Despite above-average EU union density, Cyprus’s bargaining coverage is below average.

The shift towards decentralised bargaining reflects broader neoliberal trends. Sectoral bargaining has contracted, particularly in shrinking industries like clothing and footwear, while enterprise-level bargaining has expanded in the growing service sector. The financial crisis accelerated this trend, as seen in banking, where firm-level negotiations replaced sectoral talks following the disbanding of the employers’ association in 2015.

Union influence is challenged by fragmented employment structures and resistant employers. The Ministry of Labour frequently mediates disputes, often rooted in misinterpretations of outdated agreements. The Industrial Relations Code (IRC) governs voluntary mediation and arbitration in the private and semi-public sectors, while public sector disputes follow separate procedures.

Since 2011, the economic crisis and the Memorandum of Understanding with the Troika undermined social dialogue, as state decisions increasingly bypassed unions. Modest revival efforts began in 2019, though union activity remained muted during the pandemic. Employers sometimes used the crisis to curtail rights, while fear of unemployment weakened worker resistance. The Ministry of Labour played a key role in maintaining labour peace through mediation.

Industrial relations saw renewed turbulence in 2023–2024, marked by Cyprus's first general strike over the Cost-of-Living-Allowance (COLA), a major dispute involving low-paid public employees, and the longest strike in Cypriot history in the ready-mix concrete industry.

Turkish Cypriots

As mentioned earlier, trade unions are almost exclusively organised in the public and semi-public sectors where various social dialogue mechanisms exist. Some of these are functioning relatively well, some work well when the government is willing, and some of them exist only on paper. In the last ten years, a general deterioration can be observed in the functioning of these mechanisms. This largely stems from the economic protocols signed between the TRNC and Ankara, which envisage austerity measures. In a setting where the government remains the biggest employer, the Ministry of Finance casts a long shadow over the social dialogue mechanisms, particularly when it comes to negotiations over material benefits for the working population. Additionally, the government is reluctant to take steps which may limit its room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis other social partners. Therefore, it tends either to ignore its responsibilities as a stakeholder in the social dialogue at the expense of violating the law or fails to take steps to render these mechanisms functional.

Although public sector employees have the right to collective bargaining in general, they are not entitled to sign a collective agreement. This has been the privilege of a small group consisting mainly of manual workers in the public and semi-public sectors. The broadest collective agreement is negotiated between the Ministry of Finance and Kamu-İş, which represents manual workers in the public sector. Elsewhere, collective bargaining is very decentralised and takes place exclusively at the workplace level.

White-collar employees in the public sector, on the other hand, are subject to a different collective bargaining mechanism, called the »protocol talks«. These are held between the Ministry of Finance, and the two trade unions representing white-collar employees in the public administra-

tion, as well as the trade unions representing teachers and healthcare sector employees. However, this mechanism has started to lose its relevance; since 2007, no protocol has been signed, and for some years the Ministry of Finance did not even bother to schedule a meeting, although by law one has to take place every year.

As mentioned earlier, unionisation and collective bargaining is very rare in the private sector. The only social dialogue mechanism, concerning private sector employees is the Minimum Wage Determination Commission, which is made up of five representatives from the Employers' Union, five representatives from the biggest trade union federation (currently Hür-İş) and five government representatives. The commission meets at least once a year to determine the statutory minimum wage. In recent years, it met twice a year.

TRADE UNIONS AND THEIR (POLITICAL) WEIGHT

Greek Cypriots

Despite the decline in trade union density and influence, collective bargaining in Cyprus has survived the economic crisis relatively intact, unlike in other Southern European countries. However, growing precarious employment, falling living standards, and underemployment remain critical challenges. Efforts by major unions PEO and SEK to establish a collective bargaining extension mechanism in 2012 were blocked by employers, yet unions continue to prioritise collective agreements over statutory regulation.

In 2023–2024, unions successfully renewed several sectoral agreements, notably in construction and tourism, and advocated reforms to the national minimum wage, including reinstating the Cost-of-Living Allowance (COLA) and eliminating exemptions. Labour inspection capacity was reinforced in 2024 with legislative measures targeting informal employment, including higher fines and a digital employment registry.

Public trust in unions eroded in the wake of the financial crisis, austerity, and political entanglements, contributing to falling membership and institutional credibility. Nevertheless, no alternative actors have emerged to represent workers' interests, and unions remain the primary vehicle for labour advocacy.

Unions now face declining political influence and increasingly confrontational employer behaviour, making it harder to defend workers, especially the vulnerable. Yet their core aim—to uphold collective bargaining as the central labour market regulator—remains unchanged. Recognising their weakening bargaining power, PEO and SEK also support a stronger statutory floor of minimum rights and wages.

Collective agreement coverage continues to shrink, with increased violations and employer-imposed changes. Still, at

international rankings, Cypriot unions have managed to retain considerable ground. In 2024, PEO recorded its highest new membership since 2010, with 228 companies unionised—the best outcome in 15 years.

While social acceptance of unions has declined, momentum is building for legislative advances, especially in extending collective agreements under the EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages, revising COLA, and strengthening the minimum wage framework. Cyprus's unions remain active in European and international networks. PEO is particularly aligned with the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), while SEK maintains strong ties with the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC).

Turkish Cypriots

Trade unions in northern Cyprus generally align with political parties along ideological lines, though no formal links exist. They have been effective in organising mass protests on key political issues, notably their major role in mobilising support for the island's reunification and EU accession between 2002–2004. Although reunification was rejected in the 2004 referendum by the Greek Cypriot community, the island joined the EU, and pro-reunification parties later gained power in the north, with presidential victories between 2005 and 2020.

However, trade unions have historically had limited influence on economic policymaking, a trend that has worsened over the past 15 years due to Ankara's increasing control via economic protocols with the TRNC government. The Trade Union Platform briefly mobilised significant opposition to austerity in 2010–2011, but these protests did not alter policy outcomes.

A rare success came in 2018 when the Ministry of Labour introduced a financial incentive scheme to promote unionisation in private media. The state covered social security and provident fund premiums for employees under collective agreements, funded by a separate employment promotion program for TRNC citizens. This led to increased unionisation in the media sector, though issues remain, such as the establishment of a company-specific union (Kıbrıs-Sen) by the largest media group "Kıbrıs", which undermines broader union solidarity.

Plans to extend the scheme to other sectors stalled after the collapse of the four-party left-leaning coalition in 2019. The rise of right-wing coalition governments from 2020 onwards, dominated by UBP, DP, and YDP, further diminished trade union influence.

Public trust in unions remains low. A March 2023 CMIRS poll rated them at 2.11/5, rising modestly to 2.27 by December 2024. Trust in government and parliament was even lower, while the judiciary and police scored highest, indicating broad institutional distrust in the TRNC.

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