

Turkish state suppresses prison revolts

Justus Leicht

22 December 2000

Brandishing rifles and waving the Turkish flag, thousands of right-wing policemen have demonstrated over the past days for the release of their colleagues in the prison service who have been convicted of torture. Their slogans included: “We want blood!” and “Left-wing organisations should get out of the way. We are ready to use our weapons!” A deputy of the fascist MHP (Grey Wolves - part of the ruling coalition) publicly called for “prisoners to be allowed to rot.” On Tuesday they got what they wanted.

Hours before dawn, police and army units stormed twenty jails in which left-wing prisoners had organised a hunger strike for more than 60 days against the introduction of isolation cells. Helicopters and armoured vehicles were used. Soldiers broke through walls in order to overcome the prisoners. In some of the gaols bitter resistance by inmates in the thoroughly unequal battle with police led to clashes lasting all day. Smoke could be seen and shots were heard. The army had sealed off the prisons and mass arrests took place of any one protesting against the actions of the state, including prisoners' relatives, lawyers and representatives of human rights organisations.

Days before the police assault, journalists had been driven away from the entrances to the prisons, reports of the hunger strike were censored and solidarity demonstrations broken up—usually by force. For their part, groups of Grey Wolves were able to terrorise left-wing opponents and demonstrate under police protection in favour of the introduction of isolation cells.

At least 19 prisoners have died as a result of Tuesday's police action, as well as hundreds being injured and two soldiers killed. At a press conference, Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit claimed that the prisoners were in possession of a large number of semi-automatic weapons. The same claim was also made last year when security forces were responsible for a massacre that

killed ten at the Ulucanlar jail in Ankara.

This time it is being claimed that most of the victims had set fire to themselves and burned to death. This version of events is very doubtful. Turkey's Justice Minister, Hikmet Sami Türk, has already conceded that one prisoner was shot after he had set himself on fire and then lurched in the direction of soldiers. Cynically, Türk said that the state could not just look on without doing anything as people were dying. He did not comment on why the prisoner had set fire to himself—if this was in fact the case—instead of giving himself up to his “rescuers”.

The storming of the prisons was a brutal show of force. At the end of last week, Türk had personally warned the prisoners to give up their protest because it endangered “public order”. Following the massacre at Ulucanlar, Ecevit had justified the actions of the police saying the authority of the state had to be defended “whatever it took.”

The recent hunger strike had won broad support. The Justice Ministry indirectly acknowledged the extent of this support last week when it justified press censorship on the grounds that, “the nation could be split.” More and more prisoners had joined the protest—the final figure was more than 1,000. Over 200 had begun a “fast to the death” and were just taking water. Many artists and intellectuals have expressed their solidarity with the prisoners' demands. Those who have sharply criticised the plans to introduce the so-called “F-type” isolation cells include doctors, psychologists, and other professionals such as architects and engineers, lawyers' organisations, as well as all the well-known supporters of human rights and prisoners aid organisations, and other bodies such as trade unions.

Until now the prison wings, where up to 60 often sleep together in one room, provided a certain protection against torture and abuse, as well as enabling prisoners to engage in political discussion. With the

introduction of the new system of isolation cells, accommodating at most three prisoners and with thick soundproofed walls, left-wing and Kurdish prisoners would be at the mercy of their warders and tormentors, who are in the main supporters of the fascist MHP. The chairman of the Turkish parliamentary human rights commission, Sema Piskinsuet, who has since been relieved of her post, confirmed that torture and abuse were a common occurrence in Turkish jails.

The isolation of inmates is the real intention of this “prison reform”. The government has repeatedly declared it is necessary to “break the power of terrorist organisations:”

In order to head off criticism of the planned introduction of the F-cells and undermine support for the hunger strike, the government announced last week that it would postpone the prison reform until “a broad consensus” in favour was realised. In light of the fears and criticisms raised, it was proposed to establish civilian controlled bodies that could investigate cases of abuse. Justice Minister Türk conceded, however, that he could not guarantee the change in law necessary to realise his promises.

He is now making the prisoners unilaterally responsible for the collapse of proposals to resolve the hunger strike. In fact the prisoners had indicated their readiness to come to a compromise and had agreed to a reduction in the number of inmates kept in the cells to a limit of 18-20. Even the vague promises of the Justice Minister have proved to be empty. On Tuesday Türk confirmed that a series of prisoners would be transferred immediately after the police action to the new prison of Sincan near Ankara.

The profound desperation and suicidal determination of the hunger strikers—many of those fasting to death and taking part in acts of self immolation were in their early twenties—stands in stark contrast to the cynicism and evident pitilessness of the Turkish state and government. The bloody end to the hunger strikes graphically illuminates a society torn apart by social contradictions and characterised by enormous tensions. The implementation of IMF programs and economic criteria dictated by Turkey's entry into the European Union, together with a continuous arming of the state apparatus, has served to bring about a situation where a small clique of employers, politicians and generals have been able to amass almost incalculable wealth, at

the expense of broad masses forced to fight on a day-to-day basis for their existence.

The position adopted by the German government is revealing. In an interview with the *Junge Welt* newspaper, Sakine Sevim, a member of the executive of the Turkish human rights organisation IHD, stated: “I have tried to make contact with Claudia Roth, chairperson of the German parliamentary committee for human rights. Unfortunately it has not worked out up until now. I have also called Cem Özdemir, a Green Party parliamentary deputy, but unfortunately he has also not returned my calls. It is no surprise that there has been no response up until now—unfortunately in Europe the introduction of the new prisons is being dealt with as part of the “Introduction of European Standards.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact