Turkey: paper workers occupy factory

Our correspondent
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More than 700 workers together with family members have occupied the Turkish Cellulose and Paper Factories (SEKA) in Izmit, northwest Turkey, since January 20. The SEKA workers oppose the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government's plan to shut down the plant and turn it over to the local council. There is also strong community support for the action undertaken by the SEKA workers.

On November 8, 2004, Turkey's Privatisation Administration decided to shut down the factory for good. In late January, the Administrative Court suspended the closure of the factory until the Privatisation Administration submits further arguments for the privatisation of several SEKA factories and the closing down of the Izmit plant. This gave false hopes to workers that the closure might not go ahead, and the Cellulose Workers Union (Seluloz-Is) leadership played a critical role in fostering this illusion.

Meanwhile, to divide the workers and break the occupation, the government transferred a total of 430 SEKA workers to other SEKA factories located in different parts of the country. Many workers were aware of the fact that the factories where it is proposed they be transferred are not operating, and they refused to leave the factory.

On February 10, the court rejected the application to suspend the closure order. The court's conclusion was identical to the government's argument: "Izmit SEKA factory has been operating at a loss for many years."

The military dictatorship instituted by the September 12, 1980, coup implemented the "free-market" economic policies that have characterised Turkish capitalism ever since. Since the end of 1980s, as a logical extension of these policies, successive right-wing and so-called left-wing governments have deliberately prevented state companies from making new investments. They have forced these companies, which have already suffered from an inevitable productivity loss, to get bank loans at exorbitant interest rates. In less than a decade, all these companies have been turned into financially worn-out disasters, which can be sold at a very low price or simply closed down if they do not attract buyers.

Izmit SEKA factory is one of the victims of this neo-liberal dispossession policy. No investment has been made in the factory since 1980, and a gradual liquidation has been implemented, with workers eliminated through attribution and machinery sold off. According to economist Erinc Yeldan of Bilkent University, an investment of $5.8 million would allow all the SEKA factories to produce various grades of paper and make the company globally competitive.

The corrupt Seluloz-Is leadership, consisting of Islamists and active supporters of the governing party, AKP, has done its best to keep the political level of the struggle at its lowest. Seluloz-Is President Ergin Alsan has made empty appeals to the AKP government: "Before the elections, you gave us your word of honor, a word of man that you will keep SEKA open. Now you should keep your promise. This is what masculinity requires!" Opposition parties and other union leaders who visit the factory also contribute to this atmosphere created by the Seluloz-Is bureaucracy.

On February 18, hundreds of security forces accompanied by armed vehicles besieged the factory, attempting to force an end to the occupation. They succeeded in roughing up some workers but soon realised that the workers are very determined and that the brutality that would be required to break their occupation would make for bad publicity. Police took family members away from the factory, but the AKP government ordered the police not to intervene for the time being. The SEKA workers are continuing their struggle.

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