

Turkey: union bureaucracy works to sabotage paper workers' occupation

Our correspondent
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On March 4, in cities across Turkey, tens of thousands workers from several industries remained at their workplaces to demonstrate their solidarity and support for the SEKA paper workers, who have been occupying their factory in Izmit, northwest Turkey, since January 20. The SEKA workers took action to oppose the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government's plan to shut down the plant and turn it over to the local council.

The action was called by the Confederation of Labour Unions of Turkey's (Turk-Is) Presidential Board, which consists of the presidents of the Turk-Is-affiliated trade unions. The board issued a statement after a March 1 meeting, which said: "Turk-Is will organise sit-ins on Friday, March 4, in solidarity with the SEKA workers. The Presidential Board calls on the government to change its decision to close SEKA Enterprises in Izmit and to allow production to go on at this workplace."

The Turk-Is bureaucracy was forced to take this step in the face of the resistance of SEKA workers and mounting pressure from other workers, particularly those employed by state companies, which are slated to be privatised in a short period of time.

Under these circumstances, the Turk-Is bureaucracy did its best to avoid a serious challenge to the government and its neo-liberal, "free-market" programme, backed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It limited its proposal for action by calling on workers of its affiliated unions to remain in their workplaces for one night.

The Turk-Is bureaucracy was also silent about any serious plans for future actions to defend the SEKA workers, planning only a March 13 or 14 rally in Izmit and limiting their criticism of the government to hollow rhetoric. Turk-Is President Salih Kilic, who has close

links with the far-right circles known as the "deep state" in Turkey, called on the government to reconsider its decision, noting that the March 4 action was a warning. As usual, Kilic utilised chauvinistic language, commenting: "Turkey is being transformed, under the policy to privatise, into a weak country that can't produce anything. We are being forced to become a country dependent on foreign products."

Although deprived of a revolutionary perspective by their union leadership, SEKA workers are instinctively critical and suspicious of the bureaucracy's manoeuvres. In an interview conducted by the web site *sendika.org*, one SEKA worker said, "They tell us we are great, but on the other hand, there is this: it needs a method. What method? You go for action, raise solidarity, if it means general strike, so be it, if it means closure, so be it, things move on based on a schedule. You don't do that, and then tell us 'you are the watchdog of this country.' That is silly.

"It is the 42nd day today. That is, I haven't gone home for 42 days. This is not a joke. Therefore, say it but also take responsibility. Follow it up with action. If not, do not say it."

Izmit, an industrial province neighbouring the country's biggest city and industrial center of Istanbul, suffered widespread damage from the earthquake of 1999 and is still trying to recover from the employment consequences of this disaster, in addition to the impact of the severe economic crisis of 2001.

The IMF-backed economic "recovery" plan in place is based on austerity in the public sector. According to this programme, strongly supported by the AKP government, a major revenue source for the treasury is a massive privatisation operation, including the shutdown of state corporations such as SEKA. In addition to SEKA, two large state-owned enterprises

employing tens of thousands of people are scheduled to be privatised in the course of 2005—PETKIM in the petrochemical industry and TUPRAS in petroleum refining.

On February 18, hundreds of security forces accompanied by armed vehicles besieged the factory, attempting to force an end to the occupation. Realising the determination of the workers, and that the brutality that would be required to break their occupation would make for bad publicity, the AKP government ordered the police not to intervene for the time being. But there are serious signs that this can change. A news report appearing in the *Cumhuriyet* newspaper on March 4 indicates that the government is making preparations to launch another police crackdown against the SEKA workers. According to this report, AKP leader and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan complained to his associates about the SEKA action: “We can no longer tolerate this. The judiciary has made up its mind about the matter and the relevant sides will execute the closure decision.”



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