

Turkey: union leadership intervenes to end paper workers' struggle

Our correspondent
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The 51-day workers' occupation of Turkish Cellulose and Paper Factories (SEKA) in Izmit, northwest Turkey, came to an end March 11, after some 700 factory workers accepted an offer by the Turkish government.

Under the terms of the agreement, the SEKA factory will be transferred to the Greater Kocaeli municipality, which will decide whether or not production at the plant is to continue. If it decides to discontinue production, it will employ the workers, under temporary contracts, at various positions with the municipality, with the stipulation that the workers' salaries will not be lower or higher than those of other municipality employees. Any SEKA workers who choose not to work for the municipality will receive their salaries for another 8 months, and then join the unemployed.

The occupation was a spontaneous effort by the workers and their families in response to a government decision to close the plant, which was later backed by an appeals court. The struggle won wide support from workers, both locally and nationally. The SEKA workers were hopeful that their initiative would spark a general strike.

But on March 1, the day the government threatened to storm the factory, the largest union in the country, the Confederation of Labour Unions of Turkey (Türk-Is), settled for a general sit-in strike after work.

Reportedly, the final agreement was reached after Selülöz-Is President Ergin Alsan met with Transportation Minister Binali Yildirim. The details of the meeting were not made public, and it is not clear why the transportation minister was involved in talks concerning paper production. Yildirim later said the architect of the proposal was Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

After the meeting, union leader Aslan organised an 8 AM assembly at the factory to explain the agreement to the workers. The workers were asked whether negotiations should continue with the government under the framework of the new agreement. 581 workers voted

'yes', and 63 voted 'no.' But even among those who voted 'yes,' there was an air of mistrust about the future of their jobs with the municipality and demands that they receive a guarantee of job security.

Kocaeli municipality is amongst the most indebted in Turkey, with a \$4.5 billion debt. The cost of the takeover of SEKA to the municipality is estimated to be around \$1.5 million per month.

The new agreement is little more than a maneuver to dissipate the resistance of the workers. The union bureaucracy is well aware that the workers know this. In an attempt to dampen workers' anxiety, in a review and "farewell" meeting the day after the agreement, Alsan said, "Our aim is to continue production in this factory. We will continue to struggle to this end." He did not explain how this would be possible under the framework of the new agreement.

The workers indicate they are tired of hearing hollow promises. On the other hand, they see no potential for a general strike in the absence of a seriously organized movement. This explains the overwhelming vote for the agreement.

A worker summed up their feelings: "In reality, the only friend is the working people themselves, but unfortunately, however you look at it, this union autocracy makes it so difficult to unite..."

"You know the slogan, 'If workers unite today, the world will be shaken,' is really true. But, for the workers to unite, there are many obstacles. All these need to be removed.

"Otherwise, I do not really believe we will reach a solution with these political parties and authorities. That's because the authority is going through the US, based on realities in Turkey. It goes through IMF, through the European Union. They are trying to destroy the government sector. They are not our friends.

"The solution is solidarity and for the workers to come

together.”

The occupation caused excitement in both the left- and right-wing sections of the establishment in Turkey. On the right, it sparked initial outrage, but eventually these forces regrouped and were able to find a compromise.

The government, in the figure of Prime Minister Erdogan, declared that the unprofitable factory could not be kept open. Initially, he tried to force the workers out of the factory, but was met with strong resistance, with the workers responding: “Over our dead bodies.”

The growing support for the SEKA workers caused anxiety and confusion in the government. The March 6 beating of demonstrators marching to celebrate International Women’s Day had already caused serious international embarrassment for the regime. As a result, the government felt obliged to make a deal with the union leadership.

On the left, the occupation was seen as a breakthrough, since workers’ struggles had sharply declined after the 1980 military coup in Turkey. Many thought the SEKA workers would become an example of workers’ resistance to the influence of big capital, which has long been driving the privatization efforts of the Turkish government.

However, the deal struck to end the occupation highlighted the treacherous role of the union bureaucracy, which kept the SEKA struggle isolated.

The SEKA occupation came in the wake of government plans to privatize in 2005 two other major state-owned enterprises in Izmit employing thousands of people: PETKIM in the petrochemical industry and TÜPRAS in petroleum refining. It is likely that, in this industrial region of Turkey, SEKA will be followed by other workers’ struggle in the near term. However, the workers clearly need to build a new leadership that will fight to unite the entire working class in Turkey.



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