

Turkey: Textile firms demand wage freeze, layoffs

Our correspondent
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On August 8, the Union of Textile, Knitting and Garment Industry Workers of Turkey (TEKSIF) announced that it could not reach an agreement with the Turkish Textile Employers' Association (TUTSIS). The union gave notice of its intent to call a strike by 11,000 workers at 17 companies.

TEKSIF representatives have been in discussions with TUTSIS since April.

During the negotiations TUTSIS demanded a wage freeze for the first half of 2007 and a 3 percent increase for the second half of the year. According to a recent study by the Turkish Central Bank, the inflation rate by the end of 2007 will be 7.49 percent. This means textile and clothing workers would suffer another cut in their real income. These workers have still not recovered from the massive losses during the 2001 crisis, thanks to the treachery of the trade union bureaucracy.

The textile industry accounts for 25 percent of exports and employs 1.5 million workers—only a small fraction of whom are unionised. According to TEKSIF's web site, in 1996 eleven out of 28 state-owned companies were sold to private owners. The remaining public undertakings were subsequently transferred to other public institutions or stopped production. "As a result of these steps taken under the name of privatization TEKSIF lost 25,000 members. With its 80,000 today, TEKSIF is still one of the largest unions in terms of membership in Turkey."

The great majority of workers are unregistered and their pay and employment conditions are appalling. They do not enjoy job security or any sort of social security protection. Due to the domination of informal economy in the industry a significant proportion of production goes unrecorded.

As a result of globalisation, textile firms face intense international competition, and over the last few years

many businesses have shut down or moved production offshore. After 2008 the industry expects to face more challenges from China.

A recent report issued by the State Planning Organization (DPT) says there will be serious cutbacks until 2020, as the elimination of export quotas on China and other countries is expected to sharply reduce Turkish exports. Textile production may decrease by more than 23 percent and ready wear by 33 percent. DTP experts have calculated that 600,000 workers could face unemployment.

Regarding the future of the industry, Mehmet Simsek, the newly elected deputy of the governing AKP (Justice and Development Party) and former economist for the Wall Street firm Merrill Lynch, said Turkey should "leave textiles to China" and promote more value-added industries and products.

Encouraged by the successive pro-company agreements signed by the unions, the textile bosses have now decided to intensify the exploitation of workers. TUTSIS Chairman Halit Narin said, "The textile and ready-to-wear sectors have no more competitive power. Employers are unable to grasp any chance for compromise."

During the military dictatorship that followed the September 12, 1980 coup, Narin was the president of the Confederation of Employers' Unions (TISK). Hailing the new constitution and labour legislation that followed, which deprived workers of their most basic rights, Narin said, "Up until today it was the workers who rejoiced. Now it is our turn."

At the same time, the national trade union federation to which TEKSIF is affiliated, the Turkish Trade Union Confederation (Turk-Is), joined the discussion of the constitution and labour legislation in an effort to provide legitimacy to the brutal military junta.

During the period of the military junta the former president of TEKSIF, Sevket Yilmaz, was part of the leadership of Turk-Is and in 1982 publicly voiced support for the military coup, claiming that some trade unionists were guilty of destabilizing the country and that the military had restored peace. Soon afterward Yilmaz was elected president of Turk-Is.

The current TEKSIF leadership is composed of the political descendants of Yilmaz and his supporters. The major concern of the labour bureaucracy is defending its privileges and political connections to the ruling establishment, not the living standards of textile workers. For this reason the TEKSIF officials are trying to convince textile workers that they must once again accept new concessions in order to defend Turkey's national interests.



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