New Turkish government prepares assault on working conditions

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The program of the 60th Turkish government, formed under the conservative Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) and led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was approved in parliament on September 5. In the national elections on July 22, the AKP won a landslide victory and has now formed a single-party government.

In addition to many anti-working class policies and its commitment to market reforms—including privatisations, deregulation and austerity measures—the program also envisages a substantial change in the labour law to make working practices even more "flexible" in favour of employers.

The government as well as leading business circles present this legislation as a requirement of compliance with European Union (EU) norms—which only underscores the class interests served by the EU.

Just four years ago the AKP government, with the help of the trade union bureaucracy, passed a new labour law (Act 4857) that introduced changes in favour of employers. This was launched as an integral part of Turkey's accession to the EU.

Warning signs of a second assault came in May when an IMF mission visited Turkey as part of regular consultations under Article IV of the IMF Articles of Agreement. The concluding statement of the IMF emphasised a so-called "easing of labour regulation" as a priority, adding that "Specific measures to reduce labour market rigidities could include (i) alleviating hiring requirements imposed on medium-sized and large companies; (ii) rationalizing mandatory severance pay; (iii) allowing more flexible terms of employment..."

Later on the State Planning Organisation (DPT) highlighted the need for more flexible working practices in its 2007 Annual Programme. Under the subtitle "Improving Labour Market," the DPT defined as "Priority 1" giving the labour market "a more flexible structure."

The 2007 programme describes the objectives: "Flexibility level in standard job contracts will be examined and the necessary adjustment will be done in order to render flexibility practices attractive for the employers and employees. Within this framework, obstacles to the practice of part-time work in particular will be determined and this type of work will be given a preferable structure with respect to both employers and employees." In short, the objective of the second wave of pro-business reforms is to remove all remaining restrictions on the use of part-time, temporary and fixed-term workers.

This will happen in a country where, according to a World Bank report, "approximately one in three workers in urban areas and three in four in rural areas are not registered with the social security institutions" (Turkey Labour Market Study, April 14, 2006).

The report continues, "Since much of Turkey's formal social protection system (pensions, health insurance, and unemployment insurance) is based on membership in the social security institutions, this means that workers are not receiving these protections." While few receive these above-mentioned benefits, even fewer, the report notes, "receive the full severance pay and other protections stipulated in the employment protection legislation."

It should be mentioned that the pensioners are poorly paid, the health system is in tatters and the scope of the unemployment insurance is extremely narrow and only provides a regular, but very small amount of payment for a few months.

According to the AKP programme, legal changes will be enacted before the end of 2009.

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With the proposed change many of the full-time registered jobs will be replaced with part-time or temporary jobs and an important portion of these workers will take part in the informal economy—where they are not even covered against workplace accidents. As in other countries, agency workers will be used to break strikes and for union-busting as well.

Neither the trade unions nor the various left protest organisations did anything to warn the working class about the coming danger or to make any preparations to stop it.

In the period of 2001-2003, during the preparation phase of the 2003 Labour Law, the trade union bureaucracy played a treacherous role in the full sense of the word. In 2001 they adopted the argument of the then coalition government, which claimed that the old labour law (Law 1475 from 1971) did not adequately reflect a modern labour relations environment.

The unions accepted the formation of a "Scientific Council" of university professors to prepare the new law and joined a tripartite commission consisting of three members each from the government, the employers (TISK) and union confederations (Turk-Is, Hak-Is, and DISK), which signed a protocol stating all sides would accept the proposals from the council. These arrangements were made behind the scenes, without the knowledge of any of the trade unions' members.

When the council's draft was submitted to the legislature in 2003, the unions, led by the ex-president of Turk-Is and then deputy of the CHP (Republican People's Party), Bayram Meral, hypocritically criticized the provisions on job security, flexitime, and flexible forms of employment. In response to his protestations government deputies showed Meral the secret protocol he had signed giving a priori agreement to the pro-business proposal.

Afterwards the trade unions occasionally paid lip service regarding the negative impact of the new law, but blocked any struggle against it.

With the introduction of the 2003 Labour Law, the legal framework for an increase in the exploitation of the working class was established. Part-time and fixed-term contracts were placed on an equal legal footing with full-time employment. Flexibility in favour of employers in terms of working time was introduced for the first time. After the law was passed, subcontracting exploded and many full-time jobs were replaced by poorly paid, dead-end jobs, including an important portion without any legal protection due to informal working.

During debate over the new government's program in parliament, opposition parties offered their criticisms, but none of them mentioned the attacks targeting working people. Their main concern was focused on Turkey's national unity.

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