

Turkish union bureaucracy adds its voice to nationalist campaign

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Under conditions in which the ongoing nationalist and chauvinist campaign led by the Turkish military for the last three years has reached new heights, the leadership of Turkey's biggest trade union organisation, the Confederation of Labour Unions of Turkey (Turk-Is), has latched on to this poisonous atmosphere in order to engineer another open and shameless sell-out of its members, as well as the working people of Turkey in general.

On October 30, Ergun Atalay, the Turk-Is financial secretary and president of the Railway Workers' Union (Demiryol-Is), declared that Turk-Is will stop all its activities and will not raise any demands to the government until the country overcomes the problem of terrorism. With his reference to terrorism, Atalay was referring to the recent PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) attacks on Turkish soldiers.

In fact, the Turk-Is bureaucracy has always proved to be a loyal partner of whichever government was in power and has never advanced a principled and serious agenda to defend and improve the wages and conditions of its members. Nevertheless, this latest pledge by the trade union leadership represents a new and dangerous adaptation to the current chauvinist campaign being conducted by both the Turkish government and military.

Atalay told the press: "Today is the day for standing back to back and arm in arm. We are going through an important period. We have to deal in unison and unity with the bloody terrorist organisation, which takes the life of people regardless of whether they are babies, young or elderly. Today, politicians, trade unionists, mass organisations, everybody has put aside politics and is acting arm in arm to support the unity of this country. For me this is the most important factor."

What Atalay calls "acting arm in arm" and "putting

politics aside" is in reality a series of anti-Kurdish rallies and demonstrations calling for an immediate war not only against the PKK fighters, but also against Kurds both within Turkey and inside Iraq. Members and sympathisers of the fascist youth organisation of the Grey Wolves have attacked premises belonging to the Kurdish nationalist DTP (Democratic Society Party), as well as innocent people of Kurdish origin.

There is no doubt that Atalay's comments aim to support the bureaucracy of Haber-Is (Union of Post Office, Telegraph, Telephone, Radio and Television Workers and Employees of Turkey), which has been looking for an opportunity to sell out 26,000 Turk Telekom workers who have been on strike since October 16. The Turk Telekom workers are disputing 23 articles of their contract agreement, including 4 regarding wages.

On October 27, the president of Haber-Is, Ali Akcan, who is well known for his links to the fascist movement, made clear that the bureaucracy was actually paving the way to sell out the strike and declared: "The fact that our country is facing this strike is difficult for us under the current conditions. If Turkey was subject to normal conditions, we would go the whole way, till the end, whatever the price."

In 2005, Oger Telecom bought a 55 percent stake in Turk Telekom for US\$6.55 billion, with the rest of the ownership remaining with the state. Oger Telecom is a subsidiary of Saudi Oger, a Saudi Arabian conglomerate controlled by relatives of Rafiq Hariri, the late Lebanese prime minister.

Soon after the privatisation of Turk Telekom and the restructuring carried out by the company management, Haber-Is lost nearly one third of its members. At the same time, the percentage of non-unionised workers within the company (30 percent of the total workforce)

has since been steadily increasing.

For years, the Haber-Is bureaucracy adopted a “do-nothing policy,” panicking recently when they realised that the real aim of company management is to wipe out the union. For many years, the Haber-Is leadership did virtually nothing to organise the workers of the private mobile companies, Turkcell, Vadofone and Avea. The union bureaucrats had hoped to preserve their parasitical existence on the basis of their membership base in the formerly state-owned telecom company.

Many of the striking Turk Telekom workers are aware of the situation and expect every kind of manoeuvre from their union leaders to sell out their strike. However, petty-bourgeois left radical parties and groups are doing all they can to blunt this awareness by keeping silent on the record of the Haber-Is bureaucracy, which is controlled by sympathisers of the fascist party.

Atalay continued his remarks by saying the bureaucracy is not interested in the economic aspect of a possible cross-border operation of the union in Northern Iraq, and repeated that they would curtail Turk-Is activities until this issue is resolved. “We are not interested in the economic aspect of it. We as Turk-Is have stopped everything. Until this issue is resolved we will not raise any demands to the people governing our country.

“We don’t care about the economic consequences. You can’t perform trade union activities in a country that is not independent. Nor can you conduct politics. This is our line. Everybody should follow our example. Today in Iraq you can’t carry out trade union activities. You can’t do politics. You can’t do anything in a country where there is no democracy, no independence,”

With these comments, the bureaucracy declares as virtually treasonous any type of action or demands raised by any section of working people—even regarding the defence of the most basic rights.

The history of Turk-Is is full of such black marks. For example, when Turkey began its invasion of northern Cyprus on July 20, 1974, the Turk-Is leadership immediately decided to suspend all strikes in order to support the government and the military action. The confederation declared that “the Turkish workers’ movement is at the command of the Turkish nation and

its courageous armed forces.”

Equally, after the military coup on September 12, 1980, and to give legitimacy to the junta, Turk-Is took part in discussions on a new constitution and trade union legislation that revoked many existing freedoms, depriving workers of their most basic rights.

During the past 13 years, Turkey has experienced three severe economic crises, which have brought unprecedented deprivation to working people. The Turk-Is bureaucracy has signed successive agreements with the government that have systematically depressed real wages in the name of defending national interests.

During the preparation phase of the 2003 Labour Law, which introduced the legal framework for an increase in the exploitation of the working class, the Turk-Is bureaucracy played a treacherous role by giving its a priori approval of the legislation.

The Turkish government, led by the AKP (Justice and Development Party), has already prepared new draft laws to launch further attacks on workers and other layers of working people in line with the demands of international banks. The latest decision by the Turk-Is bureaucracy to curtail its activities will only serve to encourage Turkish big business to intensify its attacks on the Turkish working class.



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