

Union bureaucracy betrays Turk Telekom strike

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The 44-day strike at Turk Telekom—Turkey’s fixed line telephone monopoly controlled by the Saudi company Oger Telecom—ended with a betrayal by the union bureaucracy on November 28. Haber-Is (Union of Post Office, Telegraph, Telephone, Radio and Television Workers and Employees of Turkey) sent its 26,000 striking members back to work without making any gains, although strikers had made huge sacrifices during the walkout.

Transport Minister Binali Yildirim acted as mediator between the parties during a meeting held at the headquarters of the Confederation of Labour Unions of Turkey (Turk-Is), and the deal was reached late in the evening. Salih Kilic, the president of Turk-Is, who recently made an offer to the the government to forgo all union activities as long as the problem of “terrorism” (i.e. the unresolved problem of the oppressed Kurdish minority in Turkey) is not resolved, was also present at the talks.

According to the two-year agreement, Turk Telekom workers will receive a salary hike of 10 percent in the first year (the inflation rate is expected to be 8 percent for this year) and 6.5 percent in the second year. If the inflation rate exceeds 6.5 percent as expected, then the difference will be paid to workers at the end of the year. In other words, the telecom workers will likely receive a wage increase equal to the inflation rate. This is exactly what Paul Doany, CEO of Turk Telekom said in a press release 44 days ago, as soon as the strike began, when he stated, “No employee should expect an increase above the inflation rate.”

In an utterly superficial concession workers will be paid a one-time bonus of a meagre 200 YTL (\$168)—a fraction of the wages lost by workers’ during the strike action.

In regards to another issue in the dispute - i.e. the

level of trade union membership representation, the Haber-Is bureaucracy also bowed to management. According to the agreement the current number of non-union workers will be maintained. The trade union also agreed that 650 administrative staff members are to remain non-union workers. Management only pledged not to further increase the size the administrative staff.

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. Since the privatisation and restructuring of the company Haber-Is has lost nearly one-third of its members. At the same time, the percentage of non-union workers (13, 000 employees or 30 percent of the total workforce) has been steadily rising.

For years, the Haber-Is bureaucracy did nothing to oppose this process. It has only reacted recently as it has become increasingly clear management wants to rid the company of the union. For many years, the Haber-Is leadership refused to seriously organise workers at the private mobile companies—Turkcell, Vodafone and Avea—and sought to preserve its position on the basis of their membership at the formerly state-owned telecom company.

In a statement released on November 28 Transport Minister Yildirim paid tribute to the union, saying it “worked with self-sacrifice during the strike without damaging public property and without disrupting any services.”

This explains why the telecom strike was so ineffective. Although striking workers were very determined during the 44-day strike, no major disruption occurred because the company’s 13,000 non-union workers continued operations.

Management has concluded from the strike that it doesn’t need 39,000 workers to operate the company

any longer. This means massive job cuts are on the way. Once union membership falls below 50 percent of the workforce, Turk Telekom can legally get rid of the union.



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