

Turkey: 15-month strike ends with betrayal by union bureaucracy

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On December 18, the Union of Petroleum, Chemical and Rubber Workers of Turkey (Petrol-İs) and the management of German-Italian owned Fresenius Medical Care signed a contract covering some 300 workers at Novamed, a manufacturer of bloodline and kidney dialysis equipment located in the Antalya Free Trade Zone of Turkey.

With the three-year agreement, which comes into effect on January 1, 2008, the company accepted the presence of the union and became the first unionised company within the Antalya Free Trade Zone.

Some 84 Novamed workers (corresponding to less than one third of the workforce) had been on strike since September 26, 2006, to protest poor working conditions, low pay and persistent harassment.

According to the contract agreement, wages will be increased by about 9 percent above the rate when the strike began. This is less than the inflation rate for the same period, which in 2007 is expected to exceed 9 percent. The agreement includes a wage increases of 5 percent for 2008, and 4 percent for 2009 and 2010.

According to the latest survey issued by the Central Bank of Turkey, expected annual consumer inflation for the next 12 months will be more than 6 percent and the inflation targets of the Central Bank for 2009 and 2010 are 4 percent. Therefore, the three-year contract means a loss in real wages for Novamed workers. As the agreement contains no mechanism to cover any “unexpected” increase in the inflation rate in the event of a financial or economic crisis, the total real wage losses of Novamed workers will likely increase.

In a cynical statement, the president of Petrol-İs, Mustafa Öztaskin, told *Turkish Daily News*, “We have buried past incidents and are looking to the future with hope.” Öztaskin brazenly depicted the contract as a great victory by saying, “Our aim was to prove that the

union exists in this workplace, and we managed that.” In fact, the existence of the union gives the workers less than nothing, since the company management had formerly increased wages by 5 percent every six months.

The contract contains a “social package” clause that includes a marginal payment for two religious holidays in Turkey. Even this package, however, will be subject to curbs by management based on the productivity and attendance of workers.

The International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers’ Unions (ICEM) also published a statement declaring the contract agreement a victory. ICEM General Secretary Manfred Warda stated, “This is a victory that the entire family of ICEM unions globally can be proud of. The solidarity and support by many made it happen. We now extend to both workers and managers at Novamed our wishes for a long and mutually beneficial relationship in this workplace.” While the contract will undoubtedly be beneficial to company management and the union leadership, it contains nothing positive for Novamed workers.

All of the petty-bourgeois “left” groups in Turkey have joined in this chorus, declaring the agreement a victory. They play a crucial role in providing a left cover for the deeply discredited Petrol-İs bureaucracy.

The strikers’ struggle expressed deep discontent among Turkish workers. The workers were fighting not only for higher wages, but also fairness and dignity at the workplace. Now the union bureaucracy and its “left-wing” props are trying to convince workers working for wages below the poverty line that at the moment “money is not the issue” and they should regard the recognition of the union as a major victory.

In the course of their struggle, increasing numbers of

Novamed workers have come to realise that neither the union nor their political props represent the interests of the working class.

On November 28, the 44-day strike at Turk Telekom—Turkey’s fixed-line telephone monopoly—also ended with a betrayal by the union bureaucracy. The Union of Post Office, Telegraph, Telephone, Radio and Television Workers and Employees of Turkey (Haber-Is) sent its 26,000 striking members back to work without making any gains, although strikers had made huge sacrifices during the walkout. In this case as well the Turkish “left” parties tried to depict the sell-out as a major victory.

These two recent examples clearly show that it is impossible to wage any successful struggle against the employers without a political rebellion being mounted against the trade union bureaucracy, based on an international socialist program, and a break from narrow trade union forms of struggle.



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