

# Turkey: Workers protest against betrayal by trade union confederation

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On January 2, a group of workers conducted a protest in the Turkish capital of Ankara against Turkey's biggest trade union confederation, the Confederation of Labour Unions of Turkey (Turk-Is). Turk-Is is supporting the implementation of a woefully inadequate new minimum wage announced by the Minimum Wage Fixing Commission a week ago.

According to the agreement, the minimum wage will be raised by 4 percent to a net 436 YTL (US\$372) for the first six months of 2008, and then by 5 percent to a net 458 YTL (US\$390) for the second half of the year. As the local currency (YTL) is extremely overvalued in dollar terms, the level of the minimum wage is misleading and will do little or nothing to lift millions of workers out of hunger and poverty, whose present levels are staggering.

For the first time since 1999, the minimum wage hike had been set by the mutual agreement of all sides of the commission, without any objection from Turk-Is. The commission consists of five representatives of employees (i.e., leaders of Turk-Is), five representatives of employers and five representatives of the government.

The protesting group in Ankara carried a banner asking, "Are you the government, or the TISK [Turkish Employers Federation] or representatives of workers?" Other placards read, "We demand job security" and "A minimum wage earner is hungry and miserable." The group read out a press statement in front of the head office of Turk-Is and then deposited a black wreath outside the building.

In their press statement, protestors expressed their deep disappointment and frustration with the Turk-Is leadership. "This new wage increase will not even be able to cover the recent flood of price hikes."

Earlier this month, the AKP (Justice and

Development Party) government introduced price hikes in a number of areas including electricity, natural gas and unleaded gasoline. New Year electricity prices increased by 19 percent for household consumption and 10 percent for the industrial sector; natural gas prices by 7.4 percent for household consumption and 6.4 percent for the industrial sector. It is certain that these price hikes will in turn trigger new ones (e.g., transport and food costs), and working class families, particularly those working for the minimum wage, will be the worst affected.

The protestors concluded their press statement by saying, "Shame on you for plaguing the year of 2008 and not for expressing our needs and representing us properly in the commission."

After the announcement of the new minimum wage, the general secretary of Turk-Is, Mustafa Turkel, told the media that although there had been a consensus on the decision, the minimum wage remained under the poverty line. This was nothing less than a brazen confession of an explicit betrayal. According to Turk-Is itself, the poverty line is 688 YTL (US\$585) for a four-member family in Turkey, a level significantly above the latest agreed minimum wage.

According to a recent study by the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK), the monthly "hunger level" for a family of four in 2006 is 205 YTL (US\$175), while the poverty line is 549 YTL (US\$467), a figure which once again is significantly higher than the minimum wage itself. At the same time, it must be kept in mind that TUIK uses a much more conservative and less accurate definition for poverty and hunger levels.

Social security expert Ali Tezel explained to some newspapers that when one takes into account the rate of inflation (more than 8 percent in 2007) and the yearly economic growth rate, "there should have been at least

a 16 percent increase in the minimum wage.” Tezel added, “This 9.2 percent increase isn’t enough; workers are losing around 6 percent.”

For Bulent Pirler, the secretary-general of the TISK Employers federation, the newly agreed minimum wage was a success. “The minimum wage issue has always been problematic in Turkey. The fact that the committee reached a consensus over the new minimum wage is what matters most for us,” he said, continuing, “Arriving at a consensus is a success for the committee. There isn’t such success even in European Union countries.”

In light of the paltry increase involved, even the deputy president of the Turkish Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges (TOBB), Huseyin Uzulmez, was forced to concede, “it [the wage hike] could have been better.”

For the last nine years, Turk-Is has raised largely verbal objections to the minimum wage proposals. The Turkish unions, in general, and Turk-Is and its affiliates, in particular, have reached a point where their ability to control the working class on behalf of the capitalist establishment is increasingly being undermined. For Turk-Is, the prospects of remaining a public sector union confederation—which enjoys close ties to the government—has come to an end, principally because of the massive privatisation of public assets under the current AKP government. Faced with these grim prospects Turk-Is is striving to prove its usefulness to the government by turning into an undisguised and direct tool of the employers and state.

In another recent example of its complicity with the Turkish state, Ergun Atalay, the Turk-Is financial secretary and president of the Railway Workers’ Union (Demiryol-Is), declared on October 30 that Turk-Is will stop all its activities and will not raise any demands on the government until the country overcomes the problem of “terrorism.” With his reference to terrorism, Atalay was referring to a number of attacks on Turkish soldiers attributed to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party).



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