

Brutal police attack on striking shipyard workers

On-the-spot report from Istanbul

29 February 2008

On February 25, the Port, Shipyard, Ship Construction and Repair Workers Trade Union (Limter-Is) called for a 24-hour strike from February 27 in order to protest against the appalling safety and working conditions at the Istanbul, Tuzla shipyards.

To weaken the protest, shipyard employers have asked their workers to start work one hour earlier—at 7 a.m. instead of the regular starting time of 8 a.m. As a countermeasure, workers gathered in front of Icmeler train station in Tuzla at 6 in the morning—an hour earlier than the scheduled time.

Around 1,000 workers rallied from the train station to the Tuzla square to start their sit-in protest. There was heavy police presence.

Soon after the rally started, a black private car drove straight through the crowd, hitting one of the workers. Protesters believe that this was a police provocation. However, the workers managed to keep themselves calm and to reach the Tuzla square. After a while, the police savagely attacked protesters who were continuing their protest action peacefully.

Police took dozens of people into custody by using sheer force, and around 15 people were reported injured as a result of police brutality. The president of Limter-Is, Cem Dinc, while detained at Tuzla Police Station, told the *Turkish Daily News* on the phone, “One of our friends could not hear from one ear, another one has a broken finger, while there are friends whose legs, arms were broken and skulls cracked.”

Some of the shipyard workers who weren't taken into custody but beaten by the police told us that they have cracks and injuries on different parts of their bodies. As one worker told us, “The aim of the police was to attack and beat us. This has nothing to do with proper policing.” According to claims, one woman worker who was hospitalised due to heavy beatings was also threatened with rape by police officers.

At 8 a.m., most of the protesters went back to their workplaces, and other than a few minor disruptions, there

was no trace of any work stoppages. A few hundred workers who stayed in the square were mostly on their off days or unemployed. In this sense, the strike call proved unsuccessful, and it was clear that the union didn't have the power to organise a strike.

Officially, a strike is only allowed within the context of a collective bargaining process, and this also requires the completion of a very cumbersome process. Strikes over the non-observance of collective labour agreements as well as solidarity strikes, general strikes, go-slows and workplace occupations are all forbidden. In the coming days, a prosecutor can target the union for organising an illegal strike.

Limter-Is, which is a tiny radical trade union with only a few hundred members and controlled by a Stalinist group, does not have the right to collective bargaining in the Tuzla shipyards because, according to the restrictive Turkish legal framework, to be recognised as a bargaining agent a union must represent at least 50 percent plus one of the workers within a company and 10 percent of the workers within the relevant sector nationwide.

During the sit-in protest, the WSWs talked to several shipyard workers. They painted a terrible picture about their working conditions, and, unsurprisingly, all of them wanted to keep themselves anonymous. What they told to the WSWs can be summarised as follows:

* The vast majority of workers (total number of shipyard workers in Tuzla is approximately 30,000) work for subcontractors, and these firms pay little or no attention to health and safety issues and regulations. Workers claim that employers use all sorts of dirty tricks, including paying bribes and using threats to absolve themselves from responsibility when a workplace accident happens. For instance, they say that when an accident occurs, employers provide the body with necessary safety straps and other safety equipment before the police arrive at the scene.

Paying “blood money” to relatives of the victim on the condition of their not going to court for damages is a

common practice mentioned by the workers.

The wife of a shipyard worker who died in 2006 as a result of an explosion gave a speech to the demonstrations and explained how she was pressurised and intimidated to accept the blood money. She said, “I am left with three children behind, and now I wish I had gone to court instead of accepting this dirty money. When you read the accident report, you can think that my husband committed suicide. Actually, this wasn’t the case.”

* Employers do not pay social insurance premiums in full. This not only deprives workers and their families from social protection but makes retirement impossible. Partial unregistered work is a rule for workers who work for subcontractors.

* Workers clearly see that the focus is on production and profit, and that their health and well-being are secondary.

* Daily working time is 12 hours, and workers receive no overtime premium for the extra 3 hours worked. In other words, in practice, the “normal” daily worktime is 12 hours in shipyards.

* In most of the workplaces, social rights, including breaks, are not respected.

* Main employers do not bear any responsibility regarding these problems.

According to a recent joint report commissioned by some non-governmental organisations including Limter-Is and entitled “Tuzla Shipyards Reality,” since 1992 there has been a sharp rise in work-related deaths in the Tuzla shipyards. The report notes, “Since 1983, which is the date that shipyards moved to Tuzla, 49 workers have died, with 41 of those deaths coming after 1992. While only one worker died in 2001, the number of deaths increased gradually year by year until today. In 2002, five workers died; the next year, three died. Five died in 2004, eight in 2005, and ten in 2006.”

Within the last seven months, 18 shipyard workers were killed in workplace accidents. Two of them were killed on February 12 and February 17. The recent successive deaths due to work-related accidents in shipyards and growing public outrage have brought media and political attention to the Tuzla shipyards.

Actually, the number of accidents resulting in injury is on the rise as well, and some of them leave shipyard workers incapacitated without any social protection. However, nowadays, the focus of news media interest is on the deaths and non-fatal workplace accidents that go unnoticed.

Suleyman Celebi, the president of the Confederation of Revolutionary Workers’ Trade Unions (DISK), which Limter-Is is affiliated to, gave a speech to the demonstrators and said, “Workers are being employed illegally. Their social security contributions are calculated according to the

minimum wage. Shipyard work is not considered part of the heavy work sector. Trade union activities are forbidden.”

This was totally hypocritical. All these conditions that Celebi complained about are a direct product of the 2003 Labour Law, which was accepted secretly by union leaders including himself. The 2003 Labour Law established the legal framework for an increase in the exploitation of the working class. Part-time and fixed-term contracts were placed on an equal legal footing with full-time employment. Flexible working time in favour of employers 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.

Over 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.

Afterwards, as Celebi did on Wednesday, the trade unions occasionally paid lip service regarding the negative impact of the new law, but in reality undermined any struggle against it.



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