Turkey: May Day demonstration in Istanbul brutally suppressed

Our correspondent
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On May 1, Turkish riot police savagely attacked peaceful demonstrators with clubs and fired pepper spray and water cannon to prevent them taking part in a May Day rally heading to Taksim Square, the central meeting place in Istanbul.

On April 30, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government decreed that it would not allow a demonstration in Taksim Square on the grounds that the square was not legally open to demonstrations. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan threatened the union leaders, saying, “We are warning everyone against acts and provocations by illegal organizations and I urge everyone not to play into the hands of these provocations.”

Istanbul Governor Muammer Güler expressed his determination to enforce the ban on May Day demonstrations at Taksim Square, which was enacted after the military coup in 1980 by the then-ruling junta and has been continued by consecutive governments ever since. This has a particularly symbolic meaning because on May Day 1977 right-wing provocateurs, presumably helped by state forces, opened fire on a left-wing protest in Taksim, resulting in the deaths of 37 people.

The military junta also abolished May Day as a national holiday, which it regarded as an opportunity for “left-wing activism.” The AKP government has refused to change these traditions established by the military regime.

According to the official figures announced by Istanbul Governor Güler and the police chief, Celalettin Cerrah, who played a pernicious role in engineering the violence against this year’s May Day protest, 530 demonstrators were taken into custody and 38 people were injured throughout the day.

During the days preceding the protest, Governor Güler claimed that they had accurate intelligence that suggested “PKK terrorists and members of other marginal and illegal organisations” would attack the police and they were determined to take “preemptive action.”

Although it is not possible to give out an exact figure, the number of people gathered around the square to attend the demonstration was likely no more than 15,000, but the police presence was extraordinary. With more than 20,000 policemen in uniform—not counting those undercover—the police clearly outnumbered the protesters. The police ranks were reinforced by teams sent by the government from other cities around Taksim.

Hundreds of gendarmes were deployed in Taksim Gezi Park, which was turned into a virtual police barracks in the middle of the city. Police blocked all streets and roads leading to the square and systematically and brutally broke up groups of protesters trying to enter the square and even those merely waiting on the corner.

Some ferry services, municipal buses and subway services were also suspended for many hours in an effort to block demonstrators coming to the square.

According to official figures, police officers fired more than 1,500 cans of tear gas and they used every opportunity to kick the demonstrators and beat them with clubs. While firing the tear gas some police officers deliberately lowered their launchers with the aim of hitting and injuring protesters, in some cases succeeding.

Police also fired plastic bullets at demonstrators who threw stones and bricks. Although there has not been any official statement regarding the use of plastic bullets, there are reports that such ammunition was used by police against peaceful demonstrators.

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Running after a group of demonstrators who had been tear-gassed and sought treatment at Sisli Etfal Hospital, the police also fired tear gas into the hospital, hitting old women and children. It is reported that some young children receiving leukaemia treatment in the hospital were also affected by this unprecedented police brutality.

Foreign visitors in Taksim district, a central tourist destination, were palpably shocked by what they saw.

The headquarters of the Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions of Turkey (DISK), which is located in Sisli and hosted more than 1,000 protesters, was attacked several times by police, who fired tear gas into the building.

A union official told the *Turkish Daily News*, "The first attack came without warning, while people were just sitting in front of the building. Deputies from the Democratic Society Party [DTP] and the Freedom and Solidarity Party [ODP] have tried calling the governor, the justice minister and the interior minister many times, but they refuse to speak." Ferhat Tunc, a well-known protest music artist, said, "For one moment in the [DISK] building, I thought they were going to burn us down."

After the AKP government banned the demonstration in Taksim Square, the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (Turk-Is) pledged to mobilise up to 500,000 people in defiance of the official ban. They then published conflicting statements regarding their attitude to the protest. In the end, they backed down and said they would not support the demonstration—a capitulation praised by the labour minister as "common sense."

A review of television news footage of the event, as well as photographs published in the daily papers, shows that the aim of police was not to disperse the crowd but to brutally assault the demonstrators. This is hardly surprising—the overwhelming majority of Turkish police is comprised of right-wing, fascist and Islamist elements.

The vast majority of the bourgeois news media—with the exception of Islamist outlets—criticised and for the most part condemned the AKP government, as well as the Istanbul governor and police department for using excessive force against the demonstrators. They pointed out that the AKP government was fearful of masses of people gathering in the heart of Istanbul and condemned the Islamist-conservative drift in the country.

The so-called secular news media has latched onto this opportunity to strengthen the ongoing campaign against the AKP government, which reached its highest point recently with the lodging of a legal case aimed at possibly banning the party. During the past three decades May Day demonstrations in Istanbul and other parts of the country have been marked by disproportionate use of force by police. During this time the same media outlets defended the police in a cynical fashion. In fact, they are no less hypocritical than the Islamist government and its supporters.

Some commentators have asked why the AKP does not defend democratic rights under conditions where it itself is threatened with prohibition. The reason is obvious and simple:

The brutality of the attacks by the AKP government against the working class shows that there is no essential difference between this party and their opponents in the Kemalist establishment when it comes to maintaining the bourgeois state order and enforcing the demands of international capital. Just recently Erdogan raised the pensionable age and minimized the employers' share to the national health insurance.

The brutal assault on May Day demonstrators reveals the real class character of the AKP, which operates as a party of big business and is organically hostile to the interests of the poor and working masses in Turkey.

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