

Turkish tyre workers strike Bridgestone, Goodyear and Pirelli

Our Turkish correspondent
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Approximately 4,000 workers—members of the Union of Petroleum, Chemical and Rubber Industry Workers of Turkey (Lastik-Is)—went on strike late Saturday, May 31, at four tyre production facilities belonging to the multinational corporations Bridgestone, Pirelli and Goodyear.

The struck plants are located in Izmit and Adapazari in northwestern Turkey. Both cities are important industrial and working class centres, with a large oil refinery, and major paper, cement and car factories.

According to a news report posted on the web site of ICEM (International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions), which is affiliated to Lastik-Is, "Goodyear operates an auto, light truck, bus, and heavy equipment tyre plant in Adapazari, employing 800 rubber workers, and a truck, bus, and agriculture tyre plant in Izmit, where 500 workers are employed. Bridgestone Brisa Sabanci, jointly owned by Japanese-based Bridgestone and Sabanci Group of Turkey, manufactures auto, truck, and heavy equipment tyres in Izmit, employing 1,500, while Italian-based Pirelli has another auto and truck tyre plant in Izmit, in which 1,200 workers are employed."

The main disagreements are over wage hikes, salaries for new hires, annual paid holidays, the use of temporary workers, and work hours.

Lastik-Is and representatives of the employers' association had been negotiating a new industry-wide labour agreement since September 2007.

According to the restrictive legal framework, to be able to go on strike workers must follow specific steps and complete a very long procedure, which generally takes five or six months. Turkish labour law doesn't allow solidarity strikes, general strikes, go-slows, etc., and contract bargaining must have started before any

strike action is permitted.

The tyre workers' union raised the demand for a 12 percent wage increase for the first six-month period of a two-year labour agreement, and a rise equivalent to the official rate of inflation plus one point for each six-month period thereafter. For the first half of the year the official inflation rate will average around 6 percent. In response, the tyre companies offered wage hikes equal to the official inflation rate, which envisions no real increase for a period of two years. In view of the steep rise in the cost of living, which far exceeds the official inflation rate, this would mean a de facto wage cut. The two sides also differ on various social payments.

Lastik-Is, ICEM's rubber and chemicals affiliate in Turkey, is responsible for the contract negotiations. A week ago, following the threat of a May 22 strike at four tyre plants by 3,500 workers, negotiators for Pirelli Lastikleri, Goodyear and Brisa Bridgestone Sabanci agreed to a two-year contract with the union. The deal excluded all the employer flexibility demands contained in a World Bank and IMF inspired labour code introduced in Turkey three years ago.

The number of workers involved in the dispute clearly shows the affect of subcontracting in the industry. An industrial dispute eight years ago involving the same companies and factories was undertaken by a total of 5,000 tyre workers. Moreover, throughout this eight-year period the companies concerned made new investments and enlarged their production capacities significantly. Subcontracted workers are non-union and in general the union bureaucracies do very little or nothing to organise these workers. However, the existence of such a growing mass of workers earning low wages, working longer hours, and enduring worse working conditions sets the

scene for attacks on unionised workers with relatively better conditions and wages.

Two years ago the union accepted a 5 percent wage increase for the first six-month period—equal to the official inflation rate at the time. For the next three six-month periods wage adjustments were based on the rate of inflation. Other social benefits increases were also limited to the inflation rate. Taking into account the growth rate of the economy and increased productivity, tyre workers suffered a loss in real income in the last contract.

The aim of the employers' association is to lower costs by paying less to newly hired workers and to implement more flexible working practices. By hiring new workers with low wages the employers will be able to shed older employees and play one group of workers against another. This policy agreed by the union leaders will inevitably bring disastrous results for the 4,000 tyre workers and their families. Various petty bourgeois radical left parties and groups in Turkey share the responsibility for such a betrayal through their support for the union bureaucracy.

On June 1, the union leadership declared that negotiations had continued until the early morning hours of the day, when the employers' association offered last-minute wage and social payment proposals. The Lastik-Is leadership then presented these proposals to their rank-and-file members. The employers' offer was rejected by an overwhelming 80 percent of workers.



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