

Istanbul police attack municipal workers

Our Turkish correspondent
19 July 2008

Some 2,000 municipal workers trying to stage a peaceful protest in Istanbul July 17 as part of a labour dispute were violently attacked by Turkish riot police.

That morning members of the Union of Municipal and General Service Workers (Belediye-Is) gathered in the Edirnekapi district of the Turkish capital, intending to march to the municipal building nearby. They planned to hang a notice announcing their strike on the gate of the building.

Turkish unions can take strike action within 60 days once they are unable to reach an agreement with the employer. According to the country's restrictive legal framework, a given union must give management at least one week's notice after taking the decision to go ahead with a strike.

When the workers started to march July 17, hundreds of police attacked them with clubs and fired pepper spray and water cannons. Several workers were reported injured, while many tried to escape the police violence by running into side streets. Police also attacked some photo journalists reporting on the scene.

However, the workers were determined to continue their protest and managed to reconvene in front of the municipal building. The police prevented them from carrying out their planned demonstration, but the protesters stuck together and chanted slogans such as "The mayor should resign," "We want to live reasonably" and "Prepare your budget for workers, not the IMF."

Representatives from the Istanbul municipality and Belediye-Is have been attempting to negotiate a new agreement for the last five months. Salary issues are at the center of the conflict, which involves more than 10,000 workers from the Iston, Isfalt, Isbak, Belbim and Kultur A.S. companies run by the municipality, as well as workers from the Zeytinburnu, Gaziosmanpasa, Bayrampasa, Umraniye, Uskudar, Gungoren and Adalar district municipalities.

The Istanbul metropolitan municipality, the companies run by it and the district municipalities mentioned above are all controlled by the Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party)—the ruling Turkish party.

Management representatives have offered an 8 percent pay raise for the first year of a two-year contract, although the official inflation rate is predicted to rise between 10 to 15 percent. Even the central bank has revised its forecast for inflation for 2008 to 9.3 percent.

Consumer surveys prepared by the Turkish Statistics Office (TUIK) make clear that the inflation rate for food and rent affecting most of Turkey's population is much higher than the average official rate. Accepting a wage hike of 8 percent would represent a real loss of wages for municipal workers, who have been experiencing the steady erosion of their incomes for years, thanks to the betrayals of the Belediye-Is bureaucracy. Under the pressure of their angry members, the union bureaucrats have so far been unable to organise another sell-out.

Nevertheless, Istanbul municipal workers will have to be very vigilant under conditions where the Belediye-Is leadership has betrayed them so many times in the past and will certainly do the same again behind close doors.

A local leader of the union, Hasan Gulum, told reporters, "Even though the negotiations have been going on for a long time, they offered us a salary increase of 8 percent. Bread, water and transportation have increased by 35 percent. No one can expect us to accept this 8 percent increase." However, the union has signalled its agreement of a wage increase for the second year of the contract based on the official rate of inflation, which would not take into account how far workers have already fallen behind.

The speech by Nihat Aycicek, president of the union,

made clear that Belediye-Is is attempting to prevent municipal workers from drawing the necessary lessons from the latest police attack. Aycicek resorted to chauvinist rhetoric, declaring that “Workers love their country, their state and their people more than anyone else.” This is the same state that just hit the workers with clubs.

Aycicek also emphasised that Turkey is a secular, democratic and social country, thereby clearly siding with the Kemalist wing of the establishment against the local government, controlled by the Islamist AKP. Such remarks by the union leadership are aimed at channeling the anger of municipal workers in a nationalist direction and create confusion and division in their ranks.

The sheer amount of force used by the police against a peaceful and legal protest recalls the unprecedented police brutality directed against May Day demonstrators in Istanbul two and a half months ago.

These brutal assaults on workers reveal the real class character of the AKP and show that when it comes to workers’ struggles and the necessity to maintain the bourgeois order, there is no essential difference between the AKP and its opponents in the Kemalist establishment.



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