

Turkish trade unions oversee sackings of tyre workers

Our Turkish correspondent
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Just a month after the Union of Petroleum, Chemical and Rubber Industry Workers of Turkey (Lastik-Is) ended a two-week strike in northwest Turkey, the companies involved have begun discriminatory dismissals, targeting workers who are known for their opposition to the union leadership.

Approximately 4,000 tyre workers went on strike on May 31 at four tyre-production facilities belonging to the multinationals Bridgestone, Pirelli and Goodyear. On June 14, members of Lastik-Is returned to their jobs on the basis of a contract agreed to by the union that involved a substantial decline in real income.

There are many indications that these unfair dismissals are being carried out by the companies in close cooperation with the Lastik-Is bureaucracy. Like many other unions in Turkey, Lastik-Is is notorious for its corrupt back-door relations with local managers of multinational corporations.

Last week, a number of Lastik-Is workers told a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter that the union leadership can orchestrate the dismissal of any worker. They added that workers are more fearful of the union leaders than they are of the company managers. The union bureaucrats are much more brutal and arbitrary when it comes to making decisions that jeopardise the well being of union members and their families.

Lastik-Is members told our reporter that tensions between rank-and-file members and the union leadership had been escalating steadily since September 2007, after Lastik-Is and representatives of the employers' association began negotiating a new industry-wide labour agreement. Many workers came into conflict with Lastik-Is bureaucrats, who have been looked upon with suspicion by workers for some time. According to the tyre workers, the underlying reason for the unease amongst Lastik-Is members is the

erosion of their real wages and living standards over the past decade.

They said this was the reason for the considerable support for the strike amongst the workers. An overwhelming 80 percent of tyre workers rejected the employers' initial offer on the eve of the strike. Under the pressure of its members, the union leadership was forced to call a strike. The reluctant attitude of the union leadership further eroded its credibility in the eyes of the workers.

Tyre workers occupy a strategically strong position in the Turkish economy, and they are well aware of this fact. According to reports issued by the three multinational tyre companies, total daily losses during the strike amounted to YTL 10 million (US\$8.2 million). Supply losses are also a serious problem for Turkish automotive exports, which account for 75 percent of the industry's total production.

According to the recently signed two-year contract between the union and the employers' association, wages will increase by 14 percent in 2008, and in 2009 wage increases will equal the official inflation rate. All other earnings-related social benefits will also increase by the official inflation rate over the duration of the labour agreement.

On August 4, the Turkish Statistics Institute (TUIK) announced that in July, Turkey's inflation rate rose to 12.1 percent, from 10.6 percent in June. The producer price index increased even faster, rising by 1.25 percent. Annually adjusted, this amounts to an increase of 18.4 percent.

The Central Bank recently increased its forecast for year-end inflation to 10.6 percent. According to calculations made by economist Mustafa Sonmez, based on giving priority to price increases on those goods that affect most of Turkey's population, such as

food, rent and utilities, “real inflation” will total no less than 25 percent this year.

Even on the basis of the official inflation rate, the new contract includes no real wage increase. In view of the steep rise in the cost of living, which far exceeds the official inflation rate, tyre workers will suffer substantial real wage losses in both 2008 and 2009.

Ending the strike with such an unsatisfactory result made things even worse, and a group of workers decided to stand for shop steward elections.

The Lastik-Is bureaucracy reacted to this threat by resorting to brutal tactics. First, it collaborated with the local management of Goodyear and engineered the sacking of 11 workers. In Izmit and Adapazari, where these factories are located, not only tyre workers but the local populace know that the Lastik-Is leaders have a direct hand in this affair.

The workers told our reporter, “Even if the union leadership was not involved in the dismissal of our colleagues, why did they refuse to lift a finger to help them?” Indeed, the Lastik-Is bureaucracy has kept totally silent regarding the dismissals.

The Pirelli factory followed suit, and outspoken critics of the union were sacked. Now tyre workers are expecting the same to happen at the Bridgestone plant.

Workers call this “a purge organised by the president of the union, Abdullah Karacan.” The union leadership also withdrew shop steward status from some union representatives at the Pirelli plant whom the bureaucrats regard to be “unreliable.”

Lastik-Is is one of the few affiliates of the Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions of Turkey (DISK), which still functions and does not exist only on paper. However, its record of continual submission to management only serves to delay its inevitable demise.

The number of workers involved in the dispute shows the impact 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, 1,000 more than in the recent strike. During this eight-year period, the companies made new investments and enlarged their production capacities significantly.

Subcontracted workers are non-union and, in general, the union bureaucracies do little or nothing to organise them. However, the existence of a growing mass of

workers earning low wages, working longer hours and enduring harsher working conditions sets the scene for attacks on unionised workers who have enjoyed relatively better conditions and wages.

It is clear that this is not a matter of concern for the Lastik-Is bureaucracy, which is preoccupied first and foremost with preserving its own privileges.

The Lastik-Is bureaucracy is not an aberration. All Turkish unions, irrespective of trade union confederation, have signed a series of contracts over the past two years involving substantial real wage cuts.



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