Corruption scandal shakes Turkish building workers union

Sinan Ikinci
13 September 2008

A massive corruption scandal has erupted in the Union of Road Building and Construction Workers of Turkey (Yol-Is), revealing that the union leaders have been pocketing huge sums of money and engaging in different types of corrupt activities for personal benefit.

The allegations against the union leaders are very serious, including forgery of documents, deriving huge amounts of personal benefits by different means and simply cooking the books.

The scandal was partially reported on by the national press, although the Yol-Is bureaucracy has made every endeavour to wash its dirty linen in private. On September 6 and 7, the union organised an extraordinary congress under secrecy. Only delegates and professionals hired by and working for the union were allowed to attend the congress. Press members and rank-and-file union members were excluded.

Amongst the allegations known to the public are the following:

* Union President Fikret Barin and the other seven members of the union leadership received hefty travel allowances for 365 days every year irrespective of whether they travelled or not. This was in addition to their salaries, which are 10 to 12 times as high as the average income of union members. Moreover, they were able to draw as much as money they liked under the title of "representation allowance." Thus, every month, they at least doubled their official wages, hiding their real incomes from the membership and the public.

* Some Yol-Is leaders, in direct breach of the law, were granted huge advance payments up to US$200,000 for a period of months and years without interest. In Turkey, it is possible to earn huge amounts of money by simply depositing such sums in the bank, as short-term interest rates oscillate between 17 and 20 percent.

* Home utility expenses, private credit card and private cell phone bills, and many other types of private expenses of Yol-Is bureaucrats were covered from the union's coffers.

* One scheme involving the forgery of documents involved the purchase of 19,000 hats carrying the name of the union on April 6, 2007. This is a typical and major expense item for Turkish trade unions. According to the records of Yol-Is, however, the union paid YTL 2.87 for each hat, which can be bought for YTL 0.9 from any producer. The amount involved in this single case is YTL 44.167 (US$36,200).

* A piece of land that was recently bought by the union leadership in Istanbul for US$6,300,000 was only worth US$4,750,000.

* Union resources were used to refurnish some high-ranking state officials and even ministers.

* To protect the status of some bureaucrats despite a fall in membership, the membership figures of some union branches were inflated through enrolling bogus members.

This list, while far from being complete, gives an idea of the level of corruption in Yol-Is as well as in many other Turkish trade unions. Although Yol-Is has lost a considerable portion of its members due to rapid privatisations, subcontracting and marketisation of public services during the last decade, it is still one of the biggest and financially strongest affiliate of Turk-Is (Confederation of Labour Unions of Turkey), the country's biggest trade union confederation.

During the last two decades, corruption within the ranks of the trade union bureaucracy has reached its zenith. Every year, several major scandals have erupted within Turkish unions at the same time as they face a rapid decline in membership. Each year, one or two trade unions are added to the list of labour organisations that only exist on paper.

Officials in Yol-Is and other unions often use a system of patronage to keep a core network of shady congress delegates loyal to them. Different types of allowances and

© World Socialist Web Site

“business trips” are the most common means to this end.

When members raise demands for democracy and accountability, the bureaucracies react in a hostile way. Under the existing system and the deep alienation between rank-and-file and union leaders, ordinary members have no means of keeping track of where their dues money is going. Demanding accountability from their union can put the workers’ jobs and even their safety at risk. (See: Turkish trade unions oversee sackings of tyre workers.)

What is brought to light is only the tip of the iceberg. Only a few of the corruption charges have been scrutinised, and those implicated are usually acquitted and go unpunished.

Such scandals are hardly unique to the Turkish unions. From Germany, to the US, to South Africa, the upper middle class layers who control the unions have torn themselves free from any genuine accountability to the membership, while working to become “partners” in the corporate exploitation of the working class. This process has been accelerated over the last two decades as globalisation undermined the program of national reformism and the unions were transformed from organisations that pressured the employers into organisations that pressure workers to give up concessions in order to attract investment.

According to a statement posted on the web site of Yol-Is, at the congress two separate lists competed against each other and the executive board list under the leadership of former finance secretary Ramazan Agar won the election. The defeated list was led by the former president of the union, Fikret Barin.

Actually, Agar and Barin are accomplices. In the face of this unsavoury scandal, however, they have fallen out with each other. After the congress, Agar told the press he will take Barin to court, as if any of these corrupt practices had been possible without the knowledge and involvement of the financial secretary of the union.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site