

Turkish trade unions collaborate in imposing poverty wages

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At the end of December the Minimum Wage Determination Commission in Turkey announced its target figure for the first half of 2009. The commission is partly composed of leading representatives of the Turkish trade union movement and sets minimum wages for the country.

A single worker over the age of 16 will receive YTL527 (€247) net a month. The new minimum wages will be implemented as of January 1, 2009. Currently the minimum wage stands at YTL503 (€236). The increase corresponds to a 4.3 percent rise.

Under conditions where the Turkish currency (YTL) has been falling against other currencies on the world's market due to seriously weekend capital inflows, the new minimum wage will very probably be worth less than €236 by the middle of 2009.

During the second half of the year, the minimum wage will increase by 4.1 percent to YTL546.

Two weeks ago Ali Tezel, a specialist in social security and labour law, told *Today's Zaman*, "Turkey's [economic] growth has been about 43 percent since the year 2000. The minimum wage has been increased as much as the inflation rate each year, but the workers haven't been given a share of the economic growth." According to Tezel, the minimum wage should stand at YTL850, to reflect economic growth and inflation.

In fact the new rate is less than the official inflation rate. A recent report by the State Planning Organization (DPT) revealed that in real terms the minimum wage dropped in both 2006 and 2007 by 0.9 percent and 0.7 percent respectively. This calculation is based on the official inflation rate.

The cumulative minimum wage increase for 2008 was 9.2 percent, and at the moment Turkey's official inflation rate is 10.52 percent. This means that a real drop for this year is inevitable and the same can be expected for the year 2009.

Calculations of inflation that give priority to those goods that affect most of Turkey's population and especially the poor, such as food, rent and other home utilities (heating, electricity, etc.) show that the real losses in 2006 and 2007 were much higher. This will be the case for next year as well.

According to the Confederation of Labour Unions of Turkey (Turk-Is), a family of four needs almost 1.5 times the current minimum wage just to cover expenses for nutrition.

According to a survey released by Turk-Is on December 24, a family of four needs YTL740 monthly just to buy food (hunger threshold) and YTL2,409 monthly to cover mandatory expenses such as food, rent, transport, health and education (poverty threshold).

Earlier this month, the Turkish Statistics Institution (TÜİK) announced the monthly minimum wage living cost as YTL720 net per person. TUIK uses a much more conservative and less accurate definition, but even this figure is significantly higher than the minimum wage itself.

The minimum wage has special significance for the Turkish working class and other layers of the population when compared with the rest of the OECD countries.

As an informal employment sector plays a major role in Turkey's economic life, it is not possible to establish the number of workers who work for minimum wage by using official statistics. Recently even the Labour Minister confessed that the share of informal or precarious jobs in Turkey is almost half of total employment.

If the official figures are to be believed, the total number of people working for a minimum wage is 3 million. On the other hand, according to a survey commissioned by the Confederation of Rightful Labour Unions (Hak-Is), the number is over 6.5 million people. When their families are taken into consideration, the minimum wage directly affects about 25 million people.

Moreover, as the minimum wage is used to calculate the minimum living allowance for all wage earners, it affects almost 20 million employed workers in total.

Under current economic conditions the Turkish minimum wage sets the level for the wage negotiations in all economic sectors.

One small tradesman, Mustafa Dincsoy told *Hurriyet Daily News*, "I just do not understand how minimum wage earners are managing. Home rents are extremely high, and life gets more expensive every day. Considering these conditions, the minimum wage should at least be YTL1,500."

For their heating needs millions of people depend on coal provided by municipalities controlled by the AKP (Justice and Development Party) for free to families living in poverty. These municipalities also hand out aid packages containing pasta, rice, salt, flour and soap three times a year, and seven loaves of bread daily.

These handouts help explain the electoral support enjoyed by the Islamist AKP for the last 6 years. The AKP uses this system as a way of disseminating Islamism amongst the urban poor working class families. As was explained on the *World Socialist Web Site* one and a half years ago: "The Islamist AKP ... rely on its own nationwide system of social support networks. While the central government carries out the dictates of the banks, which require painful cuts to the country's welfare provision, AKP activists intervene at a grassroots level to offer some relief by providing charitable contributions to those who are worst hit. This is a typical feature of Islamists in different parts of the world. Privatisation, market reforms, the weakening of a public school system, etc., create more and more space for such Islamist social support work."

In the past many poor urban families received food supplies from their relatives in the villages or towns from where they had migrated. As a result of the rapid dissolution of small farming through the implementation of brutal market policies, such food supplies have shrunk dramatically, especially following the 2001 economic crisis.

Trade union bureaucracy's betrayal

The Minimum Wage Determination Commission consists of five representatives of employees—i.e., leaders of the Confederation of Labour Unions of Turkey (Turk-Is)—five representatives of employers and five representatives of the government.

A quorum of 10 members is enough for the commission to convene, and decisions are made by majority vote. In other words the employers and their political representatives can decide the minimum wage as they see fit, and this is precisely what they have been doing for decades. The decisions made in this way represent a very concrete example of the class character of the Turkish state.

On the eve of the first round of negotiations towards the end of November, Turk-Is President Mustafa Kumlu voiced a completely unfounded optimism regarding the minimum wage talks. He voiced not a word of self-criticism regarding the plight of poor workers in Turkey, which is a direct product of the collaborationist policy of his own organisation.

Last year, shortly after being elected the new president of Turk-Is, Kumlu and his friends gave their approval to the 9.2 percent yearly minimum wage increase without voicing any verbal objections. This was the first time since 1999 that the minimum wage hike had been set by the mutual agreement of all sides of the commission, without any objection from Turk-Is.

For the moribund Turk-Is this was a desperate attempt to prove its usefulness to the government and its role as a direct tool of the employers and state.

At the time, Bulent Pirlir, the secretary-general of the TISK Employers federation, expressed his satisfaction: "The minimum wage issue has always been problematic in Turkey. The fact that the committee reached a consensus over the new minimum wage is what matters most for us. Arriving at a consensus is a success for the committee. There isn't such success even in European Union countries."

To prepare for future struggles and prevent new defeats, the Turkish working class should draw the necessary lessons and recognise the extent of the betrayal of the trade union bureaucracy.

The Turkish government is currently preparing to conclude a new deal with the International Monetary Fund that will inevitably entail fresh attacks on the living condition and rights of the population. To see what is coming, it is enough to read a couple of reports prepared by the experts of the World Bank and the IMF. With one voice they underscore the need for "liberalising restrictions on temporary employment", "avoiding further increases in the minimum wage and introducing regional differentiations", "easing hiring requirements", and "lowering severance pay requirements." These are the main pillars of a new attack in the making.

Recently the Turkish State Minister responsible for foreign trade, Kursad Tuzmen spelt out the government's motive for encouraging regional differentiations by saying: "Turkey should form its own China in order to continue to increase exports." That is, the response of Turkish capitalism to the growing threat of the international finance crisis and economic depression is to establish the forms of cheap labour and mass exploitation which characterise the Chinese economy.



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