

Union bureaucracy victimizes militants at Turkish factories

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On January 26 around 500 tyre workers at the Turk Pirelli factory, located in the western province of Kocaeli—an important industrial and working class centre in northwestern Turkey—occupied their factory after being told that 96 of them (80 blue and 16 white collar-workers) were to be laid off.

Turk Pirelli, which produces auto and truck tyres, is a subsidiary of the Italian-based multinational tyre maker and employs a total of 1,300 workers. Workers on the second shift carried out the work stoppage and occupation. They entered the factory as their shift began but refused to work and chanted slogans protesting the dismissals.

Based on past experiences, workers were aware of the fact that their union—the Union of Petroleum, Chemical and Rubber Industry Workers of Turkey (Lastik-Is)—would do its best to stop them from taking such an action. As a consequence the workers acted independently of the union. Lastik-Is, like many other unions in Turkey, has a very long and dirty record of betraying its members.

When they heard the news of factory occupation, the Lastik-Is bureaucracy initially gave the impression they would support the workers. Hasan Huseyin Cakar, the branch leader of the Union of Petroleum, Chemical and Rubber Industry Workers of Turkey (Lastik-Is), told the press, "We demand that the employer take back the decision to terminate jobs." Abdullah Karacan, the president of Lastik-Is, noted that all Turk Pirelli workers had given their support to the occupation.

However, after these remarks the union did nothing to encourage other sections of workers to come to the assistance of the Turk Pirelli workers. It soon became apparent that behind the scenes Karacan and his team were manoeuvring with management to suppress the struggle.

On January 27 management announced that the number of workers to be dismissed would be reduced to 30. The company also decided to suspend production until February 3 and announced that the four-day suspension would be deducted from the annual leave of Turk Pirelli workers.

Workers told a local newspaper *Ozgur Kocaeli*, that the union leadership and management singled out for sacking the workers who had led the opposition against the Lastik-Is bureaucracy. One worker said, "The union leaders negotiated in order not to stop layoffs, but to protect their own supporters. Pirelli announced that they will dismiss 80 workers—but on Monday they still had not declared the list. After negotiations, and just because we are oppositionists, they decided to dismiss us on the demand of the union leaders."

These words make it clear, that the Lastik-Is leadership turned management's attack on workers into an opportunity to get rid of militants, sabotage the workers' resistance and prove its usefulness to the Turk Pirelli management.

This is not the first occasion where the Lastik-Is bureaucracy played a key role in facilitating redundancies in close cooperation with management.

On May 31 last year, approximately 4,000 tyre workers went on strike 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 by the union that involved a substantial decline in real income.

Then in August, just a month after Lastik-Is ended a two-week tyre strike, the companies involved began widespread dismissals, targeting workers who are known for their opposition to the union leadership.

At the time, there were many indications that these

unfair dismissals were being carried out by the companies in close cooperation with the Lastik-Is bureaucracy. In the same month, a number of Lastik-Is workers told a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter that the union leadership could organise the dismissal of any particular 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.

Last year, after Lastik-Is betrayed the strike, a group of workers decided to stand for shop steward elections. The Lastik-Is bureaucracy reacted to this threat by resorting to brutal tactics. The Turk Pirelli factory sacked outspoken critics of the union. Workers told our reporter that this “was nothing but 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.”

As the global financial and economic crisis deepens, massive job cuts are spreading throughout the automotive, textile, finance and media industries. Industrial output has been falling dramatically and picking up speed. Many companies, particularly in the automotive and textile industries have suspended production—some have even stopped production permanently—and sacked thousands of workers.

Official unemployment—which hovered in between 9-10 percent during the rapid growth years during the period of 2002-2007—will reach historical heights in the coming months. It is under these conditions, that the trade union bureaucracy assumes the role of the policemen for management, to break the resistance by workers and drive down wages and conditions in order to attract international investment.



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