

Turkey: Metal workers protest threat of wage cut

Our correspondent
24 April 2009

On April 20, in Karadeniz Ereğli, a city and district in Turkey's Zonguldak Province on the Black Sea, some 1,000 angry metal workers from the Ereğli Iron and Steel Factories (Erdemir), Turkey's biggest steelmaker, stormed the branch office of their trade union, Türk Metal. The workers demanded information regarding the union's ongoing talks on concessions with company management.

The workers' worst fears appeared to have been realized. On Tuesday the Turkish press reported that the company "has received labor union consent to cut wages by 35 percent in order to avoid layoffs amid the global crisis."

Erdemir had released a written statement April 10 to the Istanbul stock exchange (IMKB) announcing that employees working at five subsidiaries of the Erdemir Group—Erdemir, Isdemir, Erengo, Erbor and Ersem—would be encouraged by means of a financial incentive package to quit their jobs.

Following this announcement, the Türk Metal leadership went into negotiations with the company management. Since then the union bureaucrats have refrained from providing workers with any kind of information regarding the latest developments, undoubtedly critical for their jobs and the livelihoods of their families.

Angry Türk Metal members were only aware of rumours circulating that either 1,500 workers (10 percent of the total workforce) would be sacked. Or have their wages cut by 20 percent. Their attempts to get information from the union leadership proved unsuccessful.

The protest by workers Monday reveals their growing anger with the union leadership. As a result of the workers' intervention, the Türk Metal bureaucracy

promised to organise an information meeting, but workers were concerned that the union leaders would sign a quick sell-out before this meeting.

The corrupt, right-wing Türk Metal union has played a leading role in facilitating layoffs and "resignations," as well as ensuring that workers offer no collective resistance. The Türk Metal bureaucracy carried out its most recent betrayal at Tofas, the Turkish manufacturer of Fiat cars.

According to a recent statement by the Confederation of Turkish Workers Unions (Turk-Is), to which Türk Metal is affiliated, in the last quarter of 2008 and January-February of 2009, 19,693 metal workers lost their jobs, and 5,478 were forced to take compulsory leave without pay. For its part, the Türk Metal bureaucracy has done nothing to organise resistance to mass redundancies.

The Erdemir Group owns Turkey's largest integrated steel plant, situated 270 kilometres from Istanbul in Karadeniz Ereğli. The Group employs around 15,000 workers.

According to the Group's own press statement, its net profit for the "first nine months of 2008 soared to TL 1.459 billion (US\$ 1.196 billion), denoting a 154 percent increase compared to the first nine months of 2007."

A few months ago, Oguz Ozgen, president and chief executive officer of Erdemir, proudly told the press, "Profitability in the third quarter of 2008 broke all records in Erdemir Group's history."

In February a former leader of Türk Metal, Mahmut Tasdemir, alleged that the union's leader at the time, Mustafa Ozbek, had cooperated with a paramilitary force, Jitem, accused of organising death squads, to retain his control over the union and apply pressure on workers. Ozbek was arrested in late January following

a police raid as part of the investigation into Ergenekon, a clandestine paramilitary-political conspiracy. Tasdemir charged that the illegal secret unit had held meetings at union headquarters.



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