

Turkish unemployment soars to record level

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According to figures released by the Turkish Statistics Institute (TUIK) last Thursday, the official unemployment rate in Turkey reached to a new historical high of 16.1 percent.

The number of unemployed people jumped by 1,125,000 from the same period last year and now totals 3,802,000. This represents a 4.2 percentage point increase.

Jobless rates in urban areas shot up by 4.7 percent to 18.1 percent. In rural areas the official unemployment rate increased by about 3.4 percent, reaching as high as 11.9 percent.

In February, unemployment among Turkish youth was calculated as 28.6 percent—up from 21.5 percent in February 2008.

Turkey's industrial production has been in freefall since last October. Economic growth for the fourth quarter of 2008 declined by a staggering 6.2 percent and many are predicting at least a 10 percent contraction for the first quarter of 2009.

TUIK does not provide seasonally adjusted data for unemployment and so non-agricultural unemployment gives a more realistic picture of unemployment trends. In February non-agricultural unemployment shot up to 19.8 percent. This was a 5.6 percent increase over the same period last year.

Although the official jobless number has reached 3.8 million, many economists say the real figure is much higher once so-called hidden unemployment is included. As economist Mustafa Sonmez explained, "On top of the official rate, if we add the number of people who have lost the hope of finding a job, temporary workers and those who say if they find a job they will work, we see that the actual rate of unemployment is higher."

A realistic calculation on this basis reveals that real number of unemployed is almost 6.5 million and the

real jobless rate is closer to 30 percent. With a meagre 45.9 percent, Turkey already has the lowest labour force participation rate of any OECD country.

These figures clearly show the hollowness of the government's repeated claims that Turkish capitalism will undertake a recovery in the near future.

The Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's unemployment target is 13.5 percent for this year. In the face of newly issued data this target is illusory.

Last month in a statement, Seyfettin Gursel and Mehmet Alper Dincer of the Bahcesehir University Centre for Economic and Social Research (BETAM), said, "We do not expect any improvement in unemployment figures in 2010 and 2011. Our estimations indicate that the unemployment rate will reach 18% in January 2010 and that the number of unemployed will climb to 4.6 million at the end of 2011. It is very likely that such high levels of unemployment will have significant political implications."

Turkey's unrelenting increase in short term and long-term unemployment will inevitably unleash a fresh round of intense class struggles in the country.

Unemployment as a social disaster

In a country where social security systems are weak or simply nonexistent for millions of people, skyrocketing unemployment has disastrous consequences for millions of people. Less than 300,000 of those currently unemployed are receiving unemployment benefits. Moreover these benefits are completely inadequate and paid for only a short period of time.

At the same time the increasing integration of Turkish capitalism into the world capitalist system and the spread of capitalist relations into the countryside has led to the disappearance of traditional social safety systems.

Rapidly rising unemployment has pushed hundreds of thousands into the informal labour sector, which harbours almost 45 percent of the national workforce. Such workers lack any sort of access to social security.

As the unemployment rate breaks historical records the news media has published a series of stories of people committing suicide due to economic pressure.

Recently Dr. Halis Ulas from the Turkish Psychiatry Association told *Today's Zaman* that unemployment is one of the main causes of depression. Ulas said, "There is a direct correlation between unemployment, poverty and suicide. Unemployment increases the risk of suicide by two to three times."

He also underlined that in the midst of an economic crisis not only do psychological stresses increase, but access to health services also decreases and this is why preventive measures are very important. A recent statement from the Turkish Psychiatry Association warned about a possible increase in Turkey's suicide rate as well as increased violence and substance abuse.

New attacks are being prepared

Under these conditions the Turkish bourgeoisie is currently planning a new attack on the working class and other layers of the working population under the pretext of waging "a war against unemployment". A recent report published annually by the OECD entitled, "Going for Growth" (GFG), lays down prescriptions for the Turkish government and business community, which have been echoed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, as well as big business speakers, in recent weeks. They include:

- Restrict wage levels to a minimum.
- Establish different minimum wages across sectors and regions.
- Ease employment protection and facilitate temporary work.
- Reform (i.e., cut or even possibly totally eradicate)

severance pay entitlements.

- Reduce incentives to retire early.

All of these policy proposals, which are aimed at increasing the rate of exploitation of the working class, have the support of Turkey's moribund and treacherous trade union apparatus, which has facilitated the implementation of such anti-working class "reforms" many times in the past.

At the end of April, one of Turkey's biggest trade unions, Turk Metal, gave its consent for a 35 percent cut in wages and bonuses—over a period of 16 months—for thousands of workers employed by the Ereğli Iron and Steel Factories (Erdemir), Turkey's biggest and very profitable steelmaker. The union justified this by claiming it was preventing mass layoffs. However, the company management refused to give any written and legally binding guarantees and layoffs are all but certain as the economic slump deepens.



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