

Strikes spread with two killed in Turkish protests

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As public employees struck across Turkey Monday, a second major Turkish union federation called for its members to carry out a nationwide strike on June 5 in opposition to the police repression of peaceful protests by the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The death toll in the brutal crackdown rose to two Tuesday with the death of Abdullah Cömert, a 22-year-old member of the youth group of the opposition CHP (Republican People's Party) who was killed in the southern city of Antakya, near the border with Syria. Initial reports suggested that he had been shot in the head, but an autopsy revealed that the fatal wound came from an exploding tear gas canister. Police have routinely fired these canisters at close range, aiming at the heads of demonstrators and in a number of cases causing fractured skulls and loss of eyes. *Hürriyet Daily News* reported that in his last posts on Facebook, Abdullah Cömert had written that he had "escaped death" for a third time during the protests and, though he was tired, would be "on the streets for the revolution." Thousands of people turned out for Cömert's funeral, which was held on Tuesday.

In an earlier incident, Mehmet Ayval?ta?, a 20-year-old member of the Socialist Solidarity Platform (SODAP), was run down and killed by a car while participating in a demonstration in a working class neighborhood of Istanbul.

According to the Turkish Medical Association, some 3,200 people were injured during police attacks on demonstrations on Sunday and Monday alone, with 26 of them left in critical condition.

The Turkish Human Rights Association, meanwhile, reported that at least 3,300 people had been detained across the country during the first four days of protests. Most have since been released.

The leadership of the 350,000-member DISK (Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions of Turkey) called for its members to march at 1 p.m. Wednesday to Taksim Square, the epicenter of the nationwide revolt that was sparked with the government's move to bulldoze Gezi Park, one of the last green spaces in central Istanbul, and replace it with a shopping mall.

"The power stemming from production will take its place in the struggle," a statement from the DISK leadership said.

Referring to the deaths of two young protesters, the DISK statement turned Erdogan's own words against him, quoting his demand that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad resign: "A leader who kills his own people has lost his legitimacy." While Erdogan's government has acted as a key ally of Washington in fomenting a war for regime-change in Syria, the intervention is opposed by the overwhelming majority of the Turkish people.

The Confederation of Public Workers' Unions (KESK) began its own two-day strike at noon on Monday, with teachers walking out of schools and universities and public workers leaving their offices and work sites. The union's 250,000 members dressed in black and wore black ribbons in protest against the repression.

The union had called for a strike against attacks on public sector workers but moved the date ahead to join their action with the Taksim square protests. In a statement, KESK warned that, "The state terror implemented against entirely peaceful protests is continuing in a way that threatens civilians' lives and safety," adding that the repression exposed the Erdogan government's "hostility to democracy."

Demonstrators poured by the thousands into

Istanbul's Taksim Square again on Tuesday night. Similar crowds assembled in Kizilay Square in the capital of Ankara and in other major cities across the country. Massed riot police surrounded the prime minister's office in the Besiktas neighborhood of Istanbul, which the demonstrators have marched on in previous protests, and armored cars equipped with water cannon were deployed in downtown Ankara in what appeared to be preparation for another night of repression.

According to CNN, "In Istanbul, the crowds have been chanting 'Tayyip resign'—referring to Erdogan—and 'shoulder to shoulder against fascism.'"

What began as a sit-in by a few dozen protesters against the destruction of a park has been transformed by mass outrage over the subsequent police repression into a nationwide outpouring of anger against the government of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP). At the heart of these protests is popular resentment of the Islamist party's increasing authoritarianism and use of state power to enrich a clique of politically connected capitalists, while riding roughshod over the social interests of the vast majority of working people.

Mounting unease within the government and Turkey's ruling establishment over the protests and spreading strikes found expression Tuesday in a public statement by Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc, who is standing in for Erdogan as the prime minister leads a four-day tour of North Africa together with Turkish businessmen.

Arinc said that the first protests to protect Taksim's Gezi Park were "just and legitimate," and he apologized for the violence unleashed by the police, who attacked the peaceful demonstrators with tear gas, pepper spray, water cannon and baton charges.

"The use of excessive force against the people who initially started this protest was wrong and it was unfair," Arinc said, adding, "So I apologize to those citizens."

He said that the government would meet with the environmental protesters, consider their concerns and possibly submit plans for the construction project on the parkland to a referendum.

"I would like to express this in all sincerity," he said, "everyone's lifestyle is important to us and we are sensitive to them." The remark appeared aimed at

assuaging bitter resentment among secular Turks and religious minorities over the AKP government's attempts to legislate Islamic restrictions on alcohol and abortion and other spheres of life.

While calling the initial demonstrations "just and legitimate," he added, "I don't think we owe an apology to those who caused destruction on the street and who interfered with people's freedom."

Arinc's apology came after a meeting with Turkish President Abdullah Gul, who made his own statement on Monday, praising the protesters and declaring that "Democracy is not just about voting; the message has been received. What is necessary will be done."

The statements stood in stark contrast with views expressed by Erdogan, who issued a paranoid rant before leaving on his tour of the Maghreb, describing the protesters as "a bunch of looters" and "wild extremists," while suggesting that they had been organized by unnamed foreign powers as well as by the secularist opposition party, the CHP.

Asked by reporters at a press conference in Morocco whether his government had gotten the "message" of the protests—the term used by Gul—he responded angrily, "What is the message? I want to hear it from you."

Also denouncing the protests was the government's finance minister, Mehmet Simsek, who wrote on Twitter Tuesday, "This mischief-making naturally affects financial markets." Turkey's stock market lost 10 percent of its value on Monday, while the Turkish lira fell to a 16-month low in response to the growing unrest. Share prices made up for about half the losses on Tuesday.

The seeming disarray within the government reflects fears that the mass protests will ignite a broader movement within the Turkish working class against social inequality and attacks on jobs and living standards, posing a direct threat to the survival of both the AKP government and Turkish capitalism.



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