

Turkey at the crossroads

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On June 4, after a week of protests that have seen hundreds of thousands of people pour into Istanbul's Taksim Square and take to the streets of Ankara, Izmir and some 65 other cities across the country, Turkey's President Abdullah Gül assured anxious businessmen that these events were not comparable to the revolutions that erupted in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011.

Gül was addressing a meeting of Turkey's International Investors Association just a day after Istanbul's stock market fell by 10.5 percent in response to the popular upheaval.

"Two years ago in London, cars were burned and shops were looted because of similar reasons," said Gül. "During revolts in Spain due to the economic crisis, people filled the squares. The Occupy Wall Street movement continued for months in the United States. What happens in Turkey is similar to these countries."

Such assurances likely proved cold comfort to businessmen fearing that continuing social protests threatened their investments.

Standing at the crossroads of East and West, Turkey has drawn into itself all of the explosive contradictions of both. It is seeking membership in a European Union that is imposing mass austerity, while simultaneously involving itself deeply in the US-backed sectarian war for regime-change in Syria.

Serving as Washington's point-man, it was Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan who demanded that Assad resign for repressing armed opponents. "A leader who kills his own people has lost his legitimacy," he declared. So far, Erdogan's repressive forces have killed three peaceful Turkish protesters, while injuring over 3,200 and arresting over 3,300 more.

Like both revolutions of 2011 and the events in the West cited by President Gül, the Turkish revolt is deeply rooted in the structure of capitalist society and

its global crisis. This has been expressed above all in the unprecedented growth of social inequality in Turkey during more than a decade of rule by Prime Minister Erdogan and his Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party) government.

Nothing else can explain how the repression of a handful of protesters attempting to stop the bulldozing of Istanbul's Gezi Park to make way for the development of a shopping mall ignited such a powerful, nationwide movement of protest, with hundreds of thousands prepared to confront the brutality of Turkish riot police.

The park project was itself emblematic of the Erdogan government's aggressive and reactionary market policies: privatizing public space to enrich a handful of crony capitalists who constitute the AKP's core political base, while seeking to transform Istanbul into a haven for the rich and privileged by driving the working class out. In the bargain, Erdogan has promoted Islamist reaction, threatening to build a mosque on the site of Taksim Square, the traditional rallying point of the Turkish workers' movement, and naming a bridge after a 16th century Ottoman sultan infamous for his slaughter of Turkey's Alevi minority.

It is the Turkish working class that has borne the brunt of the AKP government's attacks. As elsewhere, capitalists in Turkey seized upon the world financial crisis of 2008 as an opportunity to slash payrolls and drive down labor costs. By early 2009, unemployment was up to 16 percent. Growth since then has been achieved largely without adding new jobs. Instead, the threat of layoffs has been used to force those still working to labor harder for lower wages and, in many cases, accept subcontracting of work and casual labor.

According to a study released in 2011, Turkey had the second highest level of income inequality of all 34 Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, with figures only

slightly better than Mexico's and slightly worse than the third most unequal country, the United States.

Like their counterparts in Greece and the rest of Europe, Turkish workers have confronted a brutal offensive by the international banks and corporations, which see the country as a cheap-labor platform and a source of super profits.

While hundreds of thousands of workers joined union-led strikes and demonstrations on June 5, the working class as a whole has yet to move decisively into struggle. The Turkish unions have done nothing until now to fight the Erdogan government—instead endorsing its pro-capitalist measures in response to the 2008 crisis and joining it in sponsoring a campaign based on the slogan, “Go shopping.”

The unions do not want to see a decisive confrontation with this government. They are already thoroughly integrated into the consultative bodies of the European Union, which they support, and have gone along with the EU's imposition of austerity measures in neighboring Greece and elsewhere.

A revolutionary working class movement to topple the Erdogan government can emerge only independently of and in rebellion against these unions.

The Turkish events represent a deepening of the crisis of US imperialism and its militarist campaign to dominate the oil-rich regions of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia, in which Turkey, a NATO member, has served as a lynch pin.

Barely two weeks before the eruption of the current movement, Erdogan was in Washington standing side-by-side with Obama, who praised him for “being such a strong ally and partner in the region and around the world.” Washington has promoted Erdogan's government as a model for the Middle East—its police state repression of political opponents, journalists and ethnic minorities notwithstanding—as a supposedly “moderate Islamist” regime of the kind that the US has supported against the revolutionary masses in Egypt and Tunisia. Now the masses of people in Turkey are rejecting this model.

Having used Turkey as a forward base in its campaign to destabilize Syria and Iran, Washington has succeeded in destabilizing Turkey itself, where the vast majority of the population is hostile to the use of Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militias as proxies in a war to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and fear

that similar forces will be unleashed against them as well.

Turkey stands at a crossroads. Turkish workers coming into struggle are confronted with a stark choice. Will they be drawn ever more directly into bloody sectarian-based wars promoted by imperialism in pursuit of strategic and profit interests, wars that have the potential of erupting into a global conflagration involving Iran, the US, Russia, China and other powers?

Or will the working class advance its own socialist solution through an independent revolutionary struggle, drawing the masses of rural poor and oppressed behind it, against imperialism and all sections of the Turkish bourgeoisie, both Islamist and secularist?

The immediate fate of the protest movement that has taken to the streets of Istanbul and cities across Turkey is uncertain. But the coming into struggle of the Turkish working class is a question of world historic significance, with revolutionary implications for the Middle East, Europe and beyond.



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