

Thousands of auto workers strike in Turkey against Renault and union

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18 May 2015

Five thousand car workers at French car manufacturer Renault's plant have gone out on strike in the western Turkish city of Bursat. The strike over wages and benefits erupted on Thursday night in a rebellion against the Metal Workers Trade Union of Turkey (Türk-Metal).

The unofficial action is winning support from workers in nearby factories, under conditions of widespread social discontent and political tensions in the run-up to the parliamentary elections on June 7.

The Renault car workers refused to leave the factory when their shift ended. Together with the incoming shift, they staged a demonstration in the factory's courtyard, chanting slogans against both the company and Türk-Metal, from which they resigned. The workers are furious that the union had negotiated a 60 percent wage increase at a nearby Bosch car plant while abandoning their own pay claims.

Union officials claimed that the action was a protest, not an official strike.

The Renault factory is one of the biggest car plants in Turkey, producing nearly 400 cars per shift. The French company has operated in Turkey since 1969. It is integrated into the Turkish military establishment and runs its activities jointly with Oyak, the army's pension fund. Renault, with its annual production of some 318,000 cars, has 43 percent of the domestic car market.

On Friday, the strike spread to Tofa?, a joint venture between Italy's Fiat and Turkey's Koç Holding, where 5,000 car workers stopped production in support of the Renault workers' demands. The Tofa? workers assemble Fiat's Linea car, the Doblo van and other models for Peugeot, Citroen, Opel and Vauxhall.

Thousands of workers in other factories in Bursa have taken solidarity action with the Renault and Tofa? car

workers, while others gathered in front of the plant to show their support.

The Renault workers' action was provoked by Renault's refusal to increase wages. The car workers had called for a renegotiation of last year's deal on terms similar to those agreed with Bosch.

They had also demanded the right to choose their own union representatives on a democratic basis and assurances that they would not be fired for resigning from Türk-Metal. Workers have called for Türk-Metal's expulsion from the factory.

Metalworkers at large factories, including Renault and Tofa?, have complained for months about the three-year deal, signed last year, between Türk-Metal and the employers' Metal Industrialists Union of Turkey (MESS), demanding its revision.

That agreement was a complete sell out of the workers' demands. Türk-Metal union chief Pevrul Kavlak and MESS chairperson Mehmet Betil declared that the labour contract was an expression of "mutual devotion and good faith."

When the union signed a three-year labour agreement with Bosch that gave the workers at the brake system factory better conditions, auto workers resigned from Türk-Metal en masse. The union bureaucrats responded by setting fascist gangs against the workers.

The AKP (Justice and Development Party) government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is responding with increasing severity to strikes and protests.

Earlier this year, the Birle?ik Metal-?? (United Metal-Work), a small metalworkers' union, went on strike for a higher percentage wage rise for low paid workers. Using a law passed in 2012, the government responded by imposing a 60-day postponement of the strike and compulsory arbitration, claiming that the work action

endangered national security. The union simply accepted the strike-breaking action.

The government has routinely clamped down on demonstrations, particularly in Istanbul's Taksim Square. Two months ago, it pushed through new authoritarian measures aimed at suppressing dissent. It vastly expands police powers, enabling the government to deploy force against protesters, including the use of firearms, and to arbitrarily detain people. Another contentious new law allows ministers to restrict access to websites deemed a threat to lives, public order or people's rights and freedoms.

Weeks ahead of May Day, the government banned all May Day demonstrations, mobilised 10,000 police and anti-personnel vehicles a few days in advance, and closed down much of Istanbul's public transportation system to prevent large crowds from joining the demonstrations. Despite this, demonstrators gathered in Taksim Square. The police used tear gas and water cannon to disperse the demonstrators, arresting 364 people. At least 18 people were injured.

The eruption of the strike in Bursa takes place amidst a deepening economic crisis for Turkish workers. According to official statistics, 22.4 percent of Turkish households live below the poverty line, which means that poverty has actually increased during the 13 years of AKP rule. In effect, the AKP's much-vaunted policy of food and coal handouts, and various social welfare support schemes, have turned out to be little more than a massive handout to Turkey's corporate bosses.

TURK-IS, Turkey's largest trade union confederation, using different criteria to calculate the poverty line, estimates that nearly half of Turkey's population lives below the poverty line. The survey shows that the poverty rate is higher in larger families. In households with two parents and three or more dependent children, the poverty rate rose to 49.6 percent in 2014, up from 41.9 percent in 2013.

Turkey has also seen rising inflation. Prices rose by 7.9 percent in April, up from 7.6 percent in March, despite falling oil prices. The cost of food and beverages has risen by 14 percent in the last year, hitting the poorest particularly hard.

Unemployment reached 11.2 percent for the first three months of this year, up from 10.2 percent during the same period last year. Twenty percent of young people are unemployed, up from 17 percent last year.

The rise in unemployment is accompanied by slowing economic growth, with Turkey's growth falling from 4.2 percent in 2013 to 2.9 percent in 2014.

At the same time, the Turkish Lira has fallen in relation to the US dollar, reducing the value of Turkey's exports and increasing the cost of imports. Since around 30 percent of bank loans are denominated in foreign currency, this means a corresponding increase in the cost of debt service and repayments.

In the upcoming elections, Erdoğan is seeking an increased majority for his ruling AKP government in order to push through constitutional changes to move to ever more dictatorial forms of rule, amid a deepening political and economic crises and the threat of war in neighbouring Iraq and Syria.

However, polls are predicting that AKP will win 290-300 seats, far short of the majority required for a constitutional amendment.



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