

Most Turkish auto workers end strike

Jean Shaoul
26 May 2015

Production has resumed at the auto assembly plants Tofaş and Ford Otosan, and component parts factories, including CoşkunÖz and Mako, in the Bursa region in northwestern Turkey, after a three-day strike.

The wildcat action started at the Renault plant in Bursa on May 14 over pay and conditions, taken in defiance of their own union Türk Metall, which had agreed a lower pay increase than at a neighbouring Bosch plant. The workers resigned en masse from the union and demanded its expulsion from the company.

Within days the strike had escalated, expanding to all the other major factories, including Tofaş, Ford Otosan and Türk Traktör, bringing car production in Turkey to a standstill at a loss of \$70 million a day.

The auto manufacturers have agreed to give the workers a one-off cash payment of 1,000 Turkish lira (\$370) if production resumed at midnight last Monday. They said that workers would not face disciplinary action for taking strike action, as happened after the 2012 strike when at least 60 workers were fired. However, the bosses deferred any pay increase pending the outcome of a review in June after the general election on June 7.

While most of the car workers have accepted the deal, Renault's 5,500 workers refused the deal after Renault, which has a history of double-dealing, went back on its terms yet again. Although management at Tofaş and Ford Otosan said that production had restarted, some workers were still picketing the plants. A strike at another factory producing tractors is continuing.

The apparent concessions by the auto manufacturers reflect extreme nervousness on the part of the corporations and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government ahead of the elections. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is seeking an increased majority for the AKP in order to push through constitutional changes to create a presidential system of government and move to ever more

dictatorial forms of rule, amid increasing political and economic crises and the threat of war in neighbouring Iraq and Syria. Polls are predicting that the AKP will win the largest number of votes, but with only 290-300 seats—far short of the majority required for a constitutional amendment.

Turkey's main opposition parties, the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP) and the right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), are equally devoted to economic policies favouring big business and have been unable to make any serious inroads into the AKP's support. The left-talking and predominantly Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) has sought to make political capital out of the strike, with HDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş calling for solidarity.

The HDP is fielding a national list, rather than independent candidates from the Kurdish region where the party is strongest, a risky strategy that means it must attract at least 10 per cent of the vote to beat Turkey's high national election threshold to win any seats in parliament. It needs 600,000 more votes than it won in the presidential elections last summer. Should the HDP win the 72 seats that polls are predicting, it will end the era of single party AKP governments and put paid to the plans for a presidential regime.

Crucially, the ruling elite was deeply concerned that tens of millions of workers could have rallied around the car workers to address their own grievances, breaking through the decades of suppression of the class struggle by the trade union apparatus. Strikes have hit an all-time low, just nine throughout the country in 2012, thanks to the government's policy of "postponing" every significant strike with the excuse of "national security" and the pernicious role played by the trade unions that are in the pockets of big business.

The government appealed to the unions and the employers to settle the strike so as to block the development of a wider movement in the working

class, and sent two ministers for meetings with employers and unions to help negotiate an end to the walkouts.

For its part, the Türk Metall union, which has close links with the military and Turkey's ultra right-wing forces, sought to disorganise and undermine the strike, calling it an "illegal protest" and sending in its fascistic thugs to beat up workers.

While the police appear to have been reined in, they arrested 47 leaders of the strike movement charging them with leading an illegal work stoppage.

The other two metal workers unions, Birle?ik Metal, an associate of DISK (Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey) and the Steel Workers Union, are opposed to any mobilization against the government. The so-called independent union Birle?ik Metal has followed suit. In June 2013, it suspended a strike as it coincided with the Gezi Park protests, in which thousands of people mobilised against the government.

The autoworkers' wildcat took place at the same time as another stoppage. On Wednesday, 70,000 doctors began a national three-day strike in protest against weekend working, which the Health Ministry made compulsory at the start of 2015. Failure to show up for the eight-hour Saturday shifts leads to penalties, which were increased fourfold on April 16—with termination of contract following high cumulative totals.

Once again, the unions stood back and refused to organise any action, on the grounds that the walkout was simply a reaction to the "yellow" or company union, Türk Metall. They started calling the striking auto workers to ask them to enroll in Birle?ik Metal as the only progressive option.

The car workers' strike comes as the Turkish economy has started to slow after years of growth under the AKP government, led by Prime Minister and now President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The expansion of car production, part of the broader globalisation of the industry by the multi-national auto manufacturers, was a major element in that growth, with Turkey producing 1.17 million cars and commercial vehicles in 2014, up from 346,565 in 2002, when the AKP took power. About 80 percent are exported, mainly to Western Europe, accounting for \$22.3 billion or 10 percent of the country's exports last year.

The multinationals have invested heavily in building

export factories in Turkey, mainly in the Bursa region, to take advantage of low wages, little or lax regulation of working conditions, the thuggery of corrupt unions and tight legal control over strikes. Following the 2008 recession, the automakers secured a wage cut to secure their profits. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Tofas announced last November it was investing \$520 million to produce two new models, while in January Toyota said it would invest \$500 million to increase capacity by about 50 percent to 250,000 cars.

But this comes against a background of falling net foreign direct investment (FDI). FDI, valued at \$900 million in March, fell by 37 percent from March 2014's \$1.42 billion, with net FDI during the first quarter of 2015 falling by 19 percent to \$3.45 billion, down from \$4.26 billion in the same period last year.

With the metal sector one of the largest groups in the country, it sets the pace for both non-union workplaces and other industries. As the strike gathered support, Renault threatened the workers and the AKP government. Jean Christophe Kugler, Renault's head of the Eurasia division, told journalists on May 21, the company could reconsider investment in Turkey. In recognition of its broader implications, he added that the wildcat strike was a threat not only to Turkey, but also the global industry.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact