

Turkish employers grant pay raises in hopes of appeasing metalworkers

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In the early hours of January 30, Turkey's Metal Industry Employers' Association (MESS) and three trade unions (Turk-Metal, Birlesik Metal-?s and Celik-?s) signed a two-year sectoral level collective bargaining agreement, covering 130,000 workers in 179 enterprises. Thus, Turkish metalworkers have gained a 24.6 percent average wage increase, far less than the total official inflation rates of the last three years.

The MESS and the trade unions reached the agreement after the former withdrew from its previous offer of a 13.2 percent wage increase and the trade unions took a step back from their demand of a 38 percent raise.

Having been declared by Turk-Metal, one of Turkey's most right-wing unions, as "the agreement of the century," the deal does not compensate the losses Turkish metal workers have suffered for decades.

As a metal worker put it bluntly, "The mentioned gain looks like a great success, only due to our current misery," adding, "We are the people, who take whole burdens of the country without a weekend holiday of two days, other social rights and convenient working conditions. Is 2,500 Turkish Lira [around US\$675 a month] enough for a family of four?" According to the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions, to which Turk-Metal belongs, the poverty line for a family of four is 5,238 Turkish Lira (US\$1,396) a month.

Reportedly, some sections of metal workers, such as in the Kroman steel plant, have rejected the agreement and are striving to press for their original demands.

The two-year agreement came days after the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan banned the sector-wide strike scheduled to begin on February 2. On January 24, the Turkish government specified the 179 workplaces, where strike action was banned on the grounds of being "prejudicial to national security", including factories owned by multinationals such as ThyssenKrupp, Bosch,

Ford, Mercedes Benz, Renault and Siemens.

Metal workers, however, largely challenged the government decree and continued their demonstrations, carrying placards, saying, "If the state of emergency is for bosses, strikes are ours." This was a reference to Erdogan's words last July, when he said, "By taking advantage of the state of emergency, we intervene in places where a strike threat occurs. Because you cannot unsettle our business world."

Turkish metal workers have frequently defied strike bans and taken ostensibly illegal industrial action as the Turkish Government routinely bans strikes under the cover of "national security."

It was the rising anger among metalworkers that forced the Birlesik Metal trade union to refuse to recognise the strike ban and vow to continue the struggle. This was a token move to manipulate and distract working class opposition to perpetually worsening conditions, which will be further deteriorated by the ongoing Turkish military operation in Syria. Thousands of metal workers went out on a wildcat strike in May 2015, in a rebellion against the Turk Metal.

In an attempt to refurbish the completely discredited trade unions, the general secretaries of IndustriALL Global Union and IndustriAll Europe, Valter Sanches and Luc Triangle, hailed the agreement in a statement. In a cynical letter to their Turkish affiliates, they "congratulate all the Turkish metalworkers on their determined stance in these hard negotiations. Your unity, struggle and determination made it possible for such a great victory."

IndustriAll is affiliated with the German IG Metall and American United Auto Workers and United Steelworkers unions, which are determined to prevent the rebellion of Turkish workers from taking an anti-capitalist and anti-NATO direction. The corporate media and pseudo-left organisations have followed suit, declaring the agreement to be a victory.

The struggle of the Turkish metal workers is part of the growing militancy of their international sisters and brothers against starvation wages and deteriorating conditions, which recently exploded in Serbia, Romania and Greece, as well as those that shook the Tunisian and Iranian regimes. Currently, thousands of industrial workers in Germany are on strike, while the ruling elites all over the world are engaged in a drive to dismantle labor protections and destroy workers' wages and benefits in order to finance new and bigger wars.

The minor concessions the Turkish ruling class and the AKP government have made to the metal workers are bound up with their involvement in the Syrian civil war, during which they cannot afford any mass working class mobilisation that would also strengthen the anti-war sentiments within the population.

Erdogan is cracking down on every sign of opposition to the Syrian invasion. On Tuesday, 11 members of the Turkish Medical Association's (TTB's) central council were detained because they issued a statement, entitled "War is a Matter of Public Health", opposing the war.

It warned that "war is a human-made matter of public health causing harm to nature and men and threatening public life." The statement went on, "Every conflict, every war brings a huge humanitarian tragedy with it by causing irreparable physical, psychological, social and environmental damage. As members of a profession that vows to keep people alive and well, we keep in mind that advocating life and seeking a peaceful climate is our primary duty. The only way to deal with war is to perpetuate a fair, democratic, egalitarian, independent and peaceful life. No to war, peace right now!"

The World Medical Association (WMA) has condemned the arrests and called on the Turkish authorities "to immediately release the physician leaders and to end the campaign of intimidation", urging "national medical associations around the world to advocate for the full respect of Turkey's humanitarian and human rights obligations, including the right to health, freedom of association and expression."

The witch-hunt against the TTB started after Erdogan accused the association of "treason" and denounced them as "terrorist lovers" in his speech at the Extended Provincial Chairs Meeting at the AKP Headquarters on January 29. "Believe me, they are not intellectuals at all, they are a gang of slaves. They are the servants of imperialism", he said.

Taking Erdogan's words as instruction, Turkey's minister of interior, Suleyman Soylu, immediately told

journalists that the government would file a criminal complaint against the TTB. Turkey's health minister, Ahmet Demircan, also followed suit, denouncing the physicians, saying, "They do not represent Turkish doctors." The TTB, he declared, "has no right to make such a statement and it made a big mistake. There will be consequences for making such a statement at such a critical moment."

On January 25, more than 170 intellectuals, including former ministers, MPs, journalists, actors and representatives of nongovernment organisations signed a letter to MPs calling for an end to the Afrin operation and for resolution of the problems through dialogue.

"In our country and our region, we want peace and stability, not war. We believe that the best way to defend our borders and avoid existential threats is by strengthening our mutual ties of friendship and good neighbourly ties. We know that armed intervention in Afrin on Syrian soil will not bring our region or country peace and security. It will bring bigger problems, destruction and pain, and we know it will deeply wound our Kurdish citizens", says the letter.

As Turkey's military operation against US-backed Kurdish forces in Afrin entered its second week, at least 311 people have been arrested across Turkey for social media posts criticising the Syrian operation. Turkish officials accuse them of "promoting terrorism."

Among those detained were not only journalists, intellectuals and ordinary people, but also some provincial heads of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the second biggest opposition party in parliament.

Meanwhile, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim has condemned social media posts criticising Turkey's operation in Afrin as "the biggest villainy". At a conference in Ankara on January 29, he said, "Social media does not mean irresponsible media. We started holding those accountable for the crimes being committed here. We will not allow them to smear an operation that serves peace."



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