

Hundreds arrested as construction workers at Turkish airport clash with security forces

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Hundreds of Turkish construction workers were detained by police and gendarmes over the weekend after workers carried out mass protests against deadly working conditions at the site of a new airport in Istanbul.

Thousands downed their tools and angrily protested after a shuttle bus accident left 17 of their fellow workers injured. The incident was the latest in a raft of industrial accidents at the site, which workers describe as a “graveyard” due to the lack of basic safety protections and pressure from the government and the contractor to open the giant airport by the end of next month.

Hundreds of workers chanted, “We are workers, we are right. We will have our way one way or another.” The hashtag supporting the workers, “#we are not slaves” (#köledegiliz) gained strong support throughout Turkey.

Police and gendarmes used military vehicles, tear gas and water cannon to break up the protests of striking workers, according to Ozgur Karabulut, an official of the Dev Yapi-Is union. “They broke into the workers’ camp with 30 gendarmerie, broke down the doors and detained around 500 workers,” Karabulut told Reuters by phone.

Construction workers posted videos of state security forces rounding up and arresting workers. While some of the detained construction workers were released on Sunday, as of this writing hundreds remain in police and gendarme stations in Istanbul.

Istanbul Governor Vasip Sahin said that 401 people had been detained, either for refusing to work or “trying to provoke others,” according to the newspaper *Hurriyet*. It quoted him as saying that 275 were released on Sunday morning and the airport operator, Istanbul Grand Airport (IGA), had started “addressing the problems.”

Karabulut said on Sunday that 160 people had been released and the union estimated 360 remained in detention. “Some of our friends who were released last night were taken back to the camps, but they are not working,” he told Reuters. “We expect these protests to go on for a long time.”

An IGA official downplayed the protests and said that the airport would open as planned on October 29, Reuters

reported. “Our workers are working to schedule, there is no disruption at all,” said IGA’s corporate communications director, Gokhan Sengul. “There was a little bit of protest on Friday triggered by provocateurs who came in on Friday like union representatives.”

For months, workers have been protesting conditions at the site, a showcase construction project for the Erdogan government, which says it will be the largest airport in the world.

In an effort to shore up its credibility, the Dev Yapi-Is union—which has gone along with these conditions—issued a statement saying that the airport construction site was “no different than a concentration camp for workers.”

In a visit to the site last April, Minister of Transport Ahmet Arslan said that 27 workers had died from workplace accidents or poor health since construction began in 2015. Workers, however, charge that this figure is a gross underestimation.

The appearance of the transport minister followed the release of a report last February in the opposition newspaper *Cumhuriyet* saying that the government was covering up as many as 400 deaths at the site, which employs 35,000 workers.

The workers told the newspaper that employers have put pressure on them to increase productivity after several delays in the target opening date. Many deaths go unreported, workers told the newspaper, because the government pays the families of the victims—many of whom live in impoverished villages far away from Istanbul or overseas—the equivalent to \$100,000 in “hush money.”

Most of the fatalities, workers told *Cumhuriyet*, are due to the largely uncontrolled traffic of thousands of trucks around the airport site, while police officers and inspectors look the other way. One trade union official, Yunus Ozgur, told the paper that accidents killed three to four workers every week.

Workers have also complained about the poor quality of food they are served, along with infestations of fleas and bed bugs in their sleeping quarters and unpaid or late salaries. They have posted videos and pictures on social media of

insects, uncollected garbage and cracks in the ceilings and walls of the company-supplied units where they are housed.

The regime of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is fearful of opposition from the working class as the depreciation of the Turkish lira, rising inflation and a wave of layoffs sharpen class tensions.

The growth of the Turkish economy over the last decade has been chiefly based on a 15-year construction boom under Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has overseen the building of bridges, highways and now the third airport in Istanbul. These projects, however, have been dependent on the availability of cheap credit on world financial markets, which is now drying up.

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Last Friday, Erdogan said that the government was freezing new investments to rein in inflation and support the lira, which has dropped 40 percent against the dollar this year. The construction sector has already come to a standstill, leaving tens of thousands of workers unemployed and slowing down other sectors of the export-dependent economy, including the auto industry, with Ford, Mercedes Benz and Renault preparing unpaid "holidays" for autoworkers.

Under the state of emergency imposed by Erdogan following the US-backed coup attempt in July of 2016, the right to strike or protest was sharply curtailed. The lifting of the state of emergency in July was largely a symbolic act. As the mass arrests at the Istanbul airport demonstrate, the structure for mass state repression is fully intact.

In hopes of appeasing 130,000 metal workers last January, Turkey's Metal Industry Employers' Association (MESS) and three major trade unions signed a two-year collective bargaining agreement providing a 24.6 percent average wage increase. The deal followed Erdogan's ban on a scheduled industry-wide strike on the grounds that it would be "prejudicial to national security." Metalworkers challenged the government decree and continued their demonstrations, carrying placards saying, "If the state of emergency is for bosses, strikes are for us."

In February, the Interior Ministry announced that 845 people had been detained on terror charges due to their protests or posts on social media critical of a Turkish military incursion in the northern Syrian town of Afrin.

During the same month, the newspaper *Evrensel* reported, two construction workers were detained by police when they arrived at the Zmir Adnan Menderes Airport to fly to their hometown of Diyarbakir. The two workers—Nazim Toplu and Ahmet Polat—were detained by police on the grounds that they looked "suspicious." They were told to open their Facebook accounts to see if they had posted anything critical

of the government. When they refused, saying that such demands were illegal, the police seized the workers' mobile phones and entered their social media accounts from the phones. The two were eventually released when police said they were not targets of previous investigations.

The fatal accidents at the airport construction site underscore the deadly conditions for workers in Turkey, which functions as a cheap labor supplier for European and US-based multinational corporations. In 2014, the 28 EU countries registered a total of 3,700 work-related deaths. Turkey alone had 1,600 fatal accidents. The Workers' Health and Work Safety Assembly, a Turkish NGO, put last year's number of fatalities from accidents at work at 2,006. That figure was up from 1,970 deaths in 2016, the NGO said.

In 2014, 301 workers died in one of the worst industrial accidents in Turkey's history when a fire broke out in a coalmine in Soma in western Turkey. The tragedy was the outcome of privatization and International Monetary Fund-backed "structural adjustment" plans. These were implemented by Erdogan and his predecessors from all factions of the Turkish ruling class, and imposed by the unions. As one coal miner, Oktay Berrin, told the AFP at the time, "There is no security in this mine. The unions are just puppets and our management only cares about money."

The explosion of anger by construction workers in Istanbul is part of a growing movement and radicalization of the working class around the world. A decade after the global financial crash of September 2008, which was followed by the bailout of the financial aristocracy by the capitalist governments, workers in Europe, the Americas, Africa and Asia are mounting a growing number of strikes and mass protests against stagnating living standards, austerity and exploitation in the workplace. This movement will more and more take the form of an international struggle against the capitalist profit system.



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