

“It is not a crime for workers to seek their rights”

Turkish government frames up airport construction workers

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An Istanbul court granted the prosecutor’s demand that 24 workers, including two union leaders, involved in last Friday’s mass protests over the lethal working conditions at Istanbul’s new airport, be remanded in custody. The court ordered the release of the remaining 19 on condition they were subject to judicial monitoring.

These 43 workers are just a fraction of the hundreds of workers arrested during protests. Istanbul Governor Vasip Sahin said that 401 people had been detained, either for refusing to work or “trying to provoke others.” Sahin claims some 275 had been released, although the unions say many more have been arrested.

The 24 face provisional charges such as “damaging public property,” “violating laws on assemblies and rallies,” “resisting police” and “violating freedom to work,” but could face additional charges. This is a travesty of the truth and as such, sets the stage for the beginning of a vindictive and ruthless frame-up trial.

There is every indication that the authorities are seeking to make an example of these workers to intimidate and repress all opposition to the Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) efforts to place the full burden of Turkey’s economic crisis on the working class.

Pro-government media even described the protesting workers as “terrorists.” Kadir Kurt, organizing secretary at the builders’ union Insaat-Is, told the website al-Monitor, “We were publicly called terrorists. We cannot understand the reaction a legal protest created. These workers were asserting their democratic rights.”

He said the crackdown was “aimed at stirring fear to prevent workers elsewhere from demanding their rights ... which are all written into law and the violation of which should be subject to prosecution. The biggest problem is that the bosses don’t regard the worker as a human being.”

The Transportation Ministry said, “This project [Istanbul’s new airport] is Turkey’s project of pride, and no one has the power to stop or obstruct it. As we promised our people, it will open October 29, 2018, honored by our president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.”

Last Friday’s mass protests of thousands of workers at the new airport, which is being constructed on a vast 77 million square metre site of former forest and farmland near the Black Sea coast, broke out after a shuttle bus accident left 17 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 to open the first stage of 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, arresting hundreds of workers. The following day, the police carried out dawn raids on the workers’ living quarters near the construction site, arresting dozens of workers who had pledged to continue their protests.

The following day, the police presence was massively ramped up, with one young man telling Deutsche Welle, “Now it’s like a state of emergency here. There are tanks everywhere.” Another 20 people were arrested as they rallied to demand the release of the detained workers.

Workers say they are working as under military conditions. They are being put onto buses under the baton of the police-gendarmerie and working among hundreds of civilian police officers. As a worker told the Construction Workers Union, “They’re really hard on taking pictures. And now they’re looking at our phones.”

Another worker said, “It’s like we’re building a pyramid for a pharaoh. People who lost their lives while doing this pyramid are ignored. Unfortunately, even the people out there don’t know enough about what’s going on here. This perception must change. In any case, people should understand that it is not a crime to seek their rights, and that the only thing that workers do here is to seek their rights.”

The airport workers published a list of their demands that included payment of their wages, no dismissal from their jobs, more shuttle buses and better living conditions, citing the

atrocious conditions in their company-supplied container homes near the construction site. Some 15,000 workers sleep in these units, which are infested with fleas and bed bugs, and have uncollected garbage and cracks in the walls and ceilings.

A key demand was for improved safety conditions. Last February, the opposition newspaper *Cumhuriyet* said that the government—which claims that just 27 workers had died from workplace accidents or poor health since construction began in 2015—was covering up as many as 400 deaths at the site, which employs 36,000 workers, and called for the cause of their deaths to be investigated.

Kazim Bayraktar, a lawyer for the workers' union Insaat-Is, said it was impossible for union members to check the safety precautions because they were not allowed in. He told *Deutsche Welle*, "It is more difficult to get into this area than into army barracks." He said it was also almost impossible to contact the families of the deceased because, "The relatives are threatened. That's how these incidents are prevented from making it into court. It is very difficult for us to get in contact with the families."

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—as much as 631,433 lira (US\$100,000) in "hush money."

The new airport in Europe's largest city is one of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's flagship projects that he hopes will be the largest in the world. It is being built by a consortium of five Turkish companies that will pay the government about \$26 billion to operate it for 25 years.

This and similar mega infrastructure projects launched by the AKP government over the last 15 years have underpinned the growth of the Turkish economy over the last decade. But their estimated \$250 billion loans and Treasury guarantees have played a major part—alongside Ankara's worsening relations with Washington that have led to a doubling of steel and aluminum tariffs last month in retaliation to Turkey's refusal to release imprisoned US pastor Andrew Brunson—in exacerbating Turkey's foreign indebtedness and its fiscal and currency crisis.

The lira has fallen by 60 percent relative to the US dollar this year, sending inflation, already around 18 percent, and unemployment, expected to be around 15 percent in August, to new highs. It has forced Erdogan to shelve some of his grand projects in a bid to shore up the economy.

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Turkey's Central Bank has raised interest rates by 6.25 percent to 24 percent—the biggest increase since Erdogan became prime minister in 2003—to prop up the lira, in defiance of Erdogan, who has long opposed any interest rate increase.

This will drive many companies to the wall, especially in the construction industry, and many households, saddled with consumer debt, to breaking point.

Erdogan also issued a decree that property agreements must be made in Turkish lira, outlawing indexing to foreign countries, and existing contracts converted within 30 days, in a new bid to prop up the country's beleaguered currency.

Under these conditions, Erdogan and the ruling clique around him are determined to prevent any opposition that could rapidly escalate into mass class struggles.

Last July, the government ended the two-year-long state of emergency, put in place after the failed coup of July 2016, only to introduce new legislation that gives police-state measures the force of law.

The two-year-long state of emergency was used to sanction the detention of some 160,000 people—77,000 of whom have been formally charged and kept in jail pending trial—the firing of around 150,000 state employees and the annulment of nearly 200,000 passports.

Now the new "anti-terrorism law," passed in July and renewable in three years' time, strengthens the authorities' powers to detain suspects, impose public order and ban public meetings and rallies. It also authorizes the firing of public employees if there are links to or contacts with "terrorist organisations" or other "perceived threats to national security." This and the new executive presidency give Erdogan sweeping powers to stifle dissent.

Just one month later, the authorities banned a decades-old weekly vigil, whose 700th sit-in in downtown Istanbul was broken up by police, for Turkish victims who "disappeared" while in the custody of state-linked agencies and paramilitary groups.

In another ominous development, the leaders of the AKP and the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) have also agreed to restore the death penalty, abolished in 2004 as part of the accession talks with the European Union, for "terrorists" and killers of women and children. Following the coup, Erdogan said that he would restore the death penalty "without hesitation," regardless of the EU's stance.

The airport workers must be released. There is absolutely no basis for their detention or indictment.

Workers in Turkey and around the world must come to their defense. In challenging their slave-like conditions of employment, they are striking a blow for workers not just in Turkey but around the world. Their defense is a vital step in forging the international unity of the working class that is needed to fight global capital.



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