

Turkish government steps up attack on jailed airport construction workers

Our reporter
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Since an Istanbul court on September 19 jailed 24 striking construction workers, including four officials of the Construction Workers Union, the police-state attack on the working class has escalated. Ten more construction workers and trade union officials were arrested last week.

One of the latest apprehended is the chairperson of the Progressive Construction Workers Union, Özgür Karabulut. His attorney, Necdet Okcan, said: “The charge of violating freedom of work and labor include allegations that he ‘used force or threats,’ but this is not the case for Karabulut. There is no evidence against him except for his speech. ... You see the unlawfulness here. Normally, it is not possible to demand someone be arrested in such a case.”

On September 14, thousands of construction workers at the site of a new airport in Istanbul carried out protests against workplace accidents, precarious and oppressive working conditions and the violation of basic rights. The protests 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 safety protections.

The airport workers published a list of demands, including payment of wages, no dismissals, 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 some 36,000 workers. It called for the causes of their deaths to be investigated.

After the workers’ legitimate protest, police and security forces attacked and detained hundreds of workers at the site. According to the construction workers’ unions, İstanbul Grant Airport (İGA) has sacked hundreds of striking workers. While the company claims it has improved their conditions, workers deny this and say that none of the appalling working conditions have changed.

After the first arrests, workers said they were laboring under military conditions. They are forced onto buses under the batons of the police and work surrounded by hundreds of plainclothes policemen.

Last week, two unnamed airport construction workers spoke to the BBC. One of them said that on the day of the crackdown, “There were around 3,000-4,000 policemen and soldiers. Some 500 are still at the site. The airport resembles an open-air prison now. We come to work under watch of the police and the army. We feel like we go into a prison every day.”

Speaking of the police operation on September 15, the other worker told the BBC, “I was detained for 24 hours. But I’m not afraid because when you are defending your rights, you can face anything.”

The arrests and police-state methods of the Turkish government are an attack on workers not only in Turkey, but internationally. The regime of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is terrified of growing opposition from the working class, as the depreciation of the Turkish lira, rising inflation and a wave of layoffs sharpen class tensions.

President Erdogan’s government is in turmoil. It is facing an economic crisis and currency collapse

unleashed by Trump's tariffs and trade war measures, and it is bitterly opposed to Washington's use of Kurdish nationalist fighters as proxy forces in the US-NATO proxy war in Syria.

Because of this crisis, Finance Minister Berat Albayrak said last month that the Turkish government had decided to work with US consulting firm McKinsey to implement a new medium-term economic program. After critical statements by opposition parties, Albayrak defended McKinsey and said anyone who did not want Turkey to work with McKinsey was "either ignorant or a traitor."

Despite this determined statement from his minister, Erdogan said on Saturday, "I told all my ministers to no longer receive consultancy from them [McKinsey]."

Ankara's relations with Washington worsened after Turkey's refusal to release imprisoned US pastor Andrew Brunson. US officials bitterly protested this decision and Trump retaliated by doubling steel and aluminum tariffs.

Turkey's official inflation rate rose to 24.52 percent in September. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), it increased 6.3 percent from the previous month—a far bigger increase than the 3.6 percent that had been predicted in a Reuters poll of 15 economists.

Despite rising inflation, especially on prices for basic goods, and growing unemployment and poverty, the Turkish banking sector continues to make record profits. The Banking Regulation and Supervision Agency (BDDK) announced that the net profit of Turkey's banking sector totaled 38 billion Turkish liras (US\$5.94 billion) between January and August. According to these figures, the financial sector's eight-month profit surged 14.3 percent.

Meanwhile, widespread closures, bankruptcies and downsizings are threatening the working class and increasingly provoking workers' struggles. Since the airport construction workers' strike, protests and work stoppages have spread. One was carried out by Candy Hoover Eurasia workers at the beginning of October. After the layoff of 16 contract workers, some 1,000 workers in three affiliated factories went on a wildcat strike.

Under these conditions, Erdogan and his government are determined to prevent any opposition for fear that it will rapidly escalate into mass class struggles. Its brutal

attack on the protesting construction workers is aimed at intimidating all workers who seek to defend their rights. But the growth of working class resistance is inevitable. The ruling class is aware of this and has long been making plans for dictatorship and police state rule.

The elementary defense of the social and democratic rights of the working class requires that all of the framed-up construction workers be released. Workers need to oppose the arbitrary detentions and indictments of the construction workers by preparing a political movement of the working class in their defense and in opposition to militarism and police-state rule.



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