Turkish government sets minimum wage at hunger level

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After the last meeting of the Minimum Wage Determination Commission in 2020, Family, Labor and Social Services Minister Zehra Zümrüt Selçuk announced the 2021 minimum wage, received by nearly ten million workers in Turkey. It is 2,825 Turkish liras (US$377) monthly—an increase of only 500 Turkish liras (US$67).

Amid the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic, this minimum wage increase is far from compensating the decline in workers' living standards. Throughout the pandemic, as workers and their families fell ill and often paid with their lives while forced back to work, they also face a severe social attack by the ruling class.

Turkey's Minimum Wage Determination Commission meets each December to determine the next year's minimum wage. The 15-member commission has 5 representatives from employers' associations (T?SK), 5 from the largest trade union (Türk-??), and 5 officials from the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an. Workers are packed like sardines in mass transport every day as they go work in unsafe conditions, but commission members held their meetings safely online.

These negotiations amount to political theatre whose participants play predetermined roles to strangle anger in the working class. State officials supposedly play "neutral" or "mediator" roles but actually work to boost the profitability and global competitiveness of major banks and corporations. Big business representatives work to make the working class poorer every year with overt or covert collaboration from union officials.

While a majority of the votes is sufficient for the decision, it has been taken unanimously four times in the last twenty years. Türk-?? union officials have voted against 14 times in this period, aiming to contain and divert opposition among workers.

After the last negotiations, amid explosive anger in the working class at the government's response to the pandemic, Türk-?? had to oppose the wage increase offer, stating: "As the workers' side, we expected an offer above 3,000 TL from the employers' and government sides." However, predictably, neither Türk-?? nor any other union confederations have called for strikes to enforce this demand during and after the negotiations.

Türk-?? representatives are happy to posture as opponents of the deal, knowing that it does not depend on their vote. In reality, they work to block the emergence of independent working class opposition by spreading the lie that the working class is also at the table. Union bureaucrats, whose interests and social conditions are integrated with the capitalist class and its state, fear a mass struggle of the working class as much as do the capitalists.

As a result of the social counter-revolution implemented for nearly four decades, nearly 10 million workers in Turkey—almost 50 percent of all wage laborers—have been condemned to a minimum wage that means misery. With the aid of pro-capitalist unions, the bourgeoisie consciously sought to transform the minimum wage into an average wage in Turkey. Over 40 years of capitalist globalization, it sought to turn the Turkish working class into a cheap labor force for unfettered exploitation by international and local investors.

The minimum wage has evolved in line with the proletarianization of Turkey and rising social inequality. The minimum wage was 3.4 percent above the national income per capita in 1978, when Turkey still had a large farming population, but has since fallen to 40 percent below it. At the same time, wages were relentlessly pressed down towards the minimum wage: while average monthly wage income was about twice the minimum wage in 2006, it fell to 1.41 times the minimum wage in 2019.

As a result of a policy aiming to keep Turkish wages competitive against low wages in East Asia, Turkey has the second-lowest minimum wage in Europe after

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Albania. The minimum wage for 2020 was only 2,374 TL (nearly US$ 310), close to minimum wage levels in China.

The minimum wage hovers around the hunger limit—the monthly food expenditure required for a family of four to have a healthy, balanced diet. For a family of four in November 2020 in Turkey, according to research conducted by Türk-?? itself, the hunger limit was 2,516 TL (US$ 335), and the poverty threshold for a family of four was 8,197 TL (US$ 1,092). The monthly "cost of living" for a single worker was 3,073 TL (US$ 409).

With the policies implemented by the Erdo?an government during the pandemic, wages have melted compared to the cost of living: millions of workers were left unemployed or sent to unpaid leave with an only 1,170 TL (US$ 156) for a month, and the general impoverishment of the working class has seen an unprecedented acceleration.

While billions are pumped into the ruling class through low-interest loans and stimulus packages in Turkey and internationally, this debt must be paid by the working class through increased exploitation and attacks on basic social rights.

The Erdo?an government, supported by the bourgeois opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), has extended the forced "unpaid leave" until July 2021 for hundreds of thousands or millions of workers. They now receive only TL 1,170 (US$156) monthly from the state unemployment fund. More than two million other workers have also been forced to take a short-time working allowance.

As workers are impoverished, the government has prioritized the profit interests of the financial oligarchy over lives and social needs. On December 21, the COVID-19 death toll in Turkey has reached 254, the highest level since March 11, when the virus was first detected in the country. During November and December, Turkey saw a massive 30,000 cases per day.

At the same time, however, a tiny elite made vast fortunes profiteering from the pandemic. The BIST 100 Index stock market has risen 75 percent since its lowest level on March 23 (842 points), closing on the last day of 2020 at 1,476 points, its historic peak. In the same period, as real unemployment in Turkey rose above 30 percent, the minimum wage, which corresponds to approximately US$ 385 in January 2020, has declined by around 20 percent against the US dollar.

In January-September 2020, the Koç corporate empire, Turkey's largest industrial conglomerate, increased its net profits for the period to 8.481 billion TL, a 94 percent increase over the same period of 2019. Profits surged at major companies and banks in Turkey, while thousands of workers including more than 300 health care workers lost their lives due to the homicidal "herd immunity" policy the government pursued to enrich the oligarchy.

Tragically, the generalization of social misery after the pandemic has also increased suicides among workers. Recently, a musician who became unemployed after the pandemic and could not benefit from any social aid committed suicide in Istanbul. A 45-year-old man hanged himself in the northern city of Samsun after writing "job" and "food" in his hands.

Labor Minister Selçuk's response to questions over the recent suicides epitomized the callous indifference of the ruling class on the lives and livelihood of the workers. She declared: "Poverty, in particular extreme poverty is no longer a problem in Turkey."

From the very beginning, the *World Socialist Web Site* has regarded the struggle against the pandemic not only as a medical issue, but also as a social and political struggle of the working class on a global scale against the capitalist system.

The way forward against the pandemic is the independent political intervention of the international working class against the homicidal policy of the ruling class. We call on all workers to organize rank-and-file safety committees independently of pro-capitalist trade unions and politically prepare an international general strike on a perspective of a struggle against capitalism and for socialism.

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