

# Student protests continue in Turkey in defiance of police-state measures

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7 January 2021

Mass student protests in Istanbul against President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an’s appointment of a new rector to Bo?aziçi University, one of Turkey’s most prestigious universities, continued Wednesday in defiance of a brutal police-state crackdown.

The protests are dominating social media in Turkey, drawing mass sympathy from broader layers of the population. It comes amid explosive anger and opposition in the working class and youth at the government’s response to the pandemic, falling living standards and growing anti-democratic measures in Turkey and internationally.

Defying Istanbul Governor Ali Yerlikaya’s ban on demonstrations and marches in the city’s Be?ikta? and Sar?yer districts, hundreds of students demonstrated against the “trustee” rector, Prof. Dr. Melih Bulu, in front of Bo?aziçi University’s administration building. While they chanted, “Trustee rector, resign,” Bulu waved at them dismissively in a live online interview.

Despite a massive police deployment around the university, students marched nearly eight kilometres from Bo?aziçi University to Be?ikta? ferry port to go to the Kad?köy district for a mass demonstration called by student groups. Along the way, people cheered and drivers honked their horns in support of the students.

Drawing many other students, workers and supporters, the mass demonstration in Kad?köy was a powerful manifestation of growing social anger against the Erdo?an government and its authoritarian drive in the interest of the ruling class. Chanting some slogans popularized during the Gezi Park mass protests that spread across the country and shook the government in 2013, students have declared that their struggle will continue until Melih Bulu resigns and the detainees are released.

At the protest, students read a statement in the name

of “Bo?aziçi Solidarity,” advancing three demands: “1) Our detained friends should be released immediately, 2) Melih Bulu and all rectors who have been appointed as trustee should resign immediately, 3) Democratic elections should be held for the rectors of all universities.”

The Bo?aziçi University students’ protests have begun to spread to other cities and universities. Hundreds of students at the Middle East Technical University (ODTÜ) in Ankara marched Wednesday to show their solidarity. Galatasaray University and Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University students in Istanbul have also declared their support, and several youth have demonstrated for solidarity in the western city of Izmir.

When Erdo?an appointed Bulu as the rector of Bo?aziçi University, in a presidential decree on January 1, protests and criticisms began—noting that Bulu was a candidate for nomination in the 2015 general elections for Erdo?an’s Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Academics from Bo?aziçi University made a statement Sunday titled, “We don’t accept, we don’t give up!” to oppose this appointment, stating: “This is yet another case of many ongoing anti-democratic practices since 2016, aiming at abolishing rectorial elections. We do not accept it, as it clearly violates academic freedom and scientific autonomy as well as the democratic values of our university.”

While students used social media to protest this decision, student groups called for a demonstration on Monday at the university, to which thousands of students responded enthusiastically. Students also boycotted classes taking place online due to pandemic.

The government has deployed massive police forces to the university against the mass demonstration, and police harshly attacked students with rubber bullets and tear gas. In an unprecedented move, police padlocked

the gate of the university to prevent students inside and outside the university from coming together.

This reactionary offensive failed to keep students from gathering at the university. Workers also supported the protest and called for solidarity in the class struggle. Workers waging a struggle for unpaid wages and severance pay at Bimeks, an electronics company, attended the protest. Vedat Akgiray, who lectures on “business ethics” at the university, was the boss of nearly 1,500 Bimeks workers who were fired without payment in 2016.

The government’s practice of appointing university rectors began as part of a broader authoritarian and undemocratic drive immediately after the failed NATO-backed coup in 2016, which aimed to overthrow the Erdoğan government.

In a massive purge at the universities targeting opponents of the government since 2016, thousands of academics were dismissed via presidential decrees. In fact, this began in January 2016, when over 1,000 academics published a statement in the name of “Academics for Peace” to oppose ongoing military operations in the southeastern Kurdish cities that targeted the banned Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). These operations resulted in numerous deaths, including of civilians in residential areas.

When Erdoğan appointed Prof. Dr. Mehmed Özkan as the rector of Boğaziçi University in 2016—though outgoing rector Prof. Dr. Gülay Barbarosoğlu had received more than 80 percent of the votes—this also sparked protests from students and academics. Outgoing rector Özkan was also the brother of an AKP politician.

Boğaziçi University also witnessed a significant anti-war protest in 2018 under banners reading, “There is nothing to celebrate about war and occupation,” referring to the invasion of the Syrian city of Afrin by the Turkish army and its Islamist proxies. After the student protest at Boğaziçi University, many students were arrested.

After the latest protests, in a desperate effort to suppress and intimidate growing opposition among the working class and youth at the pandemic and the deepening social and economic crisis, the government has unleashed a police-state attack against the students. At least 36 youth have been detained since Monday.

Special operations units with long-barrelled weapons

snatched students in home invasion operations, breaking down doors to grab and arrest the students. Several were reportedly strip-searched in detention at police stations.

Interior Ministry spokesperson Smail Çataklı claimed on Tuesday that some detainees are related to “terrorist organizations,” defaming a peaceful and legitimate movement of students in order to divert growing support for them among workers.

Devlet Bahçeli, Erdoğan’s ally and the leader of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) denounced by Boğaziçi University protests, is promoting state and fascistic attacks against the movement. “The attempt to launch a Gezi Park uprising from Boğaziçi University is a conspiracy that must be crushed,” he said Wednesday.

This threat must be taken as a warning for youth and the entire working class of what is coming. Amid a devastating pandemic and mass poverty and unemployment, the government, representing the interests of the ruling elite, plans to respond to growing struggles in the working class against herd immunity policies with brutal police-state measures, backed by fascistic forces.

The way forward for students is to orient towards the working class, the only social force capable of defending democratic rights and defeating the drive to dictatorship of the ruling class, on the basis of an international and socialist perspective. We call on students to build branches of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at their schools to advance this perspective and develop an international socialist movement among youth.



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