

# Strikes mount in Turkey against austerity and herd immunity policies

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The Turkish government's murderous response to the pandemic and the collapse of social conditions for millions is increasingly driving workers into struggle to defend their basic rights.

On Friday, workers at Amana Foods went on a wildcat strike reportedly to protest the company firing a fellow worker after workers joined a trade union tied to the Türk-İş confederation.

Last Tuesday, construction workers at the Galataport site in Istanbul went on a wildcat strike to demand their unpaid wages. The company said it would pay their wages on February 5, but workers continue to reject working at the site.

A week before, angry construction workers at the Istanbul Finance Center site stormed the canteen to protest insect-ridden food, breaking glasses and tables. While companies have made massive fortunes, workers live and work in deplorable conditions.

Growing job cuts and forced "unpaid leave" practices are driving a growing wave of strikes. A metalworkers' strike of the Birleşik Metal-İş union (DİSK) at the Baldur factory in Kocaeli has continued since December 25. About 90 metalworkers at the Ekmekçiöğulları company in Çorum are protesting job cuts in front of the workplace. And Migros supermarket workers have waged a struggle against a forced "unpaid leave" attack by the company after they joined a trade-union.

While these struggles are signs of growing opposition within the working class, they all remain isolated and under the control of the unions. Whatever their posturing, all of the union confederations are implicated in collaborating with the government and big business to force workers to generate profits under unsafe conditions. This directly raises the need to build independent rank-and-file safety committees in all

workplaces to save lives and defend social rights amidst the pandemic.

The policies implemented by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the pandemic have left millions of workers unemployed or on unpaid leave with only 1,170 TL (US\$156) monthly in 2020, increased to only 1,420 TL after the New Year. The government, supported by the bourgeois opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), extended this forced "unpaid leave" until July 2021. Millions have also been forced to take a short-time working allowance.

Moreover, the cost of living is endlessly increasing. The Turkish Statistical Institute (Turkstat) estimated that Turkey's 2020 inflation rate stood at 14.6 percent—nearly three times more than the official 5 percent target of Central Bank (TCMB). Turkey is one of a few countries with a double-digit inflation rate. Nonetheless, the reliability of Turkstat's calculations is being widely questioned.

The issue is raised whether the state is manipulating these figures to hide the pandemic's true impact and suppress workers' demands for higher wages. The state has an interest in keeping the official inflation rate low to avoid giving raises to public employees, retirees and other workers.

Many studies suggest the real inflation figure is much higher, at 30–38 percent. For example, the Inflation Research Group (ENAG) uses the standards of "Classification of Individual Consumption According to Purpose" (COICOP) of the UN Statistics Department, a common inflation calculation method adopted by many countries. It calculated the 2020 annual inflation rate as 36.72 percent.

The ENAG found that annual price increases for staple products was even higher: 55 percent for butter, 80 percent for sunflower oil, 66 percent for olive oil, 35

percent for cheese, 67 percent for olives, 53 percent for chicken and 130 percent for eggs.

The Erdoğan government set the 2021 minimum wage, received by nearly 10 million workers in Turkey, at the hunger level of 2,825 Turkish liras (US\$380) monthly—an increase of only 500 Turkish liras (US\$67). The government is seeking to calm workers' anger by claiming that the minimum wage has been increased by more than 7 percentage points above inflation.

However, Turkey has the second-lowest minimum wage in Europe, only above Albania. The 2020 minimum wage was just 2,374 TL (around US\$320), close to minimum wage levels in China. The Turkish bourgeoisie and state seek to keep wages competitive against low wages in East Asian and Eastern European countries, and to allow unfettered exploitation by local and international capital.

The minimum wage hovers around the “hunger limit”—the monthly food expenditure a family of four needs in order to have a healthy diet. In December 2020, for a family of four, this hunger level was 2,592 TL (US\$345) and the poverty threshold was 8,436 TL (US\$1,124), according to research conducted by Türkiye İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu, Turkey's largest union confederation. The monthly cost of living for a single worker was 3,146 TL (US\$419).

The 2020 state budget deficit, projected to be 139 billion TL as 2020 began, turned out to be 173 billion TL. Public debt has risen more than 40 percent, rising from 1.1 trillion TL in 2018, to nearly 2 trillion TL in November 2020.

While billions are pumped into the ruling elite's bank accounts 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 government is exploiting the pandemic for low wages, increased exploitation and violent attacks on social rights. The economic burden of the pandemic in Turkey has been unloaded onto workers and the poor; the impoverishment of the working class has seen an unprecedented acceleration.

To finance this massive debt, the Erdogan government has implemented successive increases in many basic product prices and taxes in January. While the working class and poor pick up the tab, a tiny elite has made vast fortunes profiteering from the pandemic.

The BIST-100 stock index has risen nearly 80 percent since its lowest level (842 points) on March 23, 2020.

The “herd immunity” policy—which has led to 2.5 million confirmed cases and 26,000 deaths in Turkey, including those of 360 health care workers—is massively benefiting the financial aristocracy. Profits at Turkey's top 10 banks have surged by 36 percent compared to 2019.

Turkey's largest industrial enterprises increased their profits significantly. In the January-September 2020 period, Koç Holding increased its net profit to 8,481 billion TL, with a 94 percent increase compared to the same period of 2019. Sabancı Holding increased net profits by 69 percent in the third quarter of 2020 compared to the same period of the previous year, making a total profit of 3.8 billion TL in the nine-month period.

The only way forward for the working class to fight the pandemic and defend social rights is a struggle against the capitalist system. This means organizing and mobilizing internationally, independent of the unions, to stop nonessential production with full compensation for workers and small businesspeople, in a fight for socialism to save lives.



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