

Thousands of Istanbul electricity workers launch wildcat strike

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Thousands of workers at Bo?aziçi Elektrik Da??t?m A? (Beda?), a company distributing electricity to the European side of Istanbul, went on a wildcat strike on Friday. They are defying an official ban on strike activity in the electricity sector, to oppose poverty wages imposed by a contract negotiated with a pro-company union.

The great fear of the Turkish government, Beda? and the Tes-?? union is that this will inspire other workers, in Turkey and internationally, to oppose deadly “herd immunity” policies and mounting poverty and social inequality amid the global COVID-19 pandemic. The strike highlights the significance of the International Committee of the Fourth International’s (ICFI) launching of the call for an International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The strike came after workers were given only a 6 percent increase in the first six months and a 5 percent increase in the next six months. Food prices have soared during the pandemic, however. With real inflation at above 30 percent, such small raises mean a drastic cut in living standards.

After contract talks broke down between Beda? and Tes-??, a union linked to the Türk-?? federation, the state Supreme Arbitration Council (YHK), imposed arbitration. The YHK consists of state officials and business representatives like Confederation of Employers Unions of Turkey (T?SK) general secretary Akansel Koç. It imposed a poverty contract, with inflation officially running at 17 percent. Two Türk-?? officials, Enis Ba?dadio?lu and Erdal Arap, signed its decision anyway.

Beda? strikers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that average monthly wages are 3,200 or 3,700 Turkish lira (TL). Starting salaries are barely above Turkey’s minimum wage, 2,825 TL (US\$385), or the “hunger

limit” food expenditure for a family of four, 2,767 TL (US\$333).

One striker said that even a worker of 8 years seniority at Beda? receives only 3,700 lira, and the raise in the recent contract is less than 150 lira. He pointed out that the minimum wage was 2,000 TL in 2019, when his salary was also 3,200 TL. While the minimum wage rose by only about 40 percent amid massive inflation, wages at Beda? have fallen behind even that. The union’s demand during collective bargaining was a 20 percent raise, the company offered 15 percent and the YHK finally imposed an even smaller raise.

Workloads have surged in recent years, the worker explained: while a worker used to complete 30 different services a day, this has risen to 45 to 50. The company refused to even pay 5 TL per day for workers working outside, telling them to drink water at work. On top of brutal working conditions and low wages, workers also face arbitrary, uncompensated layoffs.

Beda?, privatized in 2013, belongs to a Cengiz Holding-Kolin ?n?aat partnership, as do many state enterprises privatized in recent decades. These two firms have made fortunes on state contracts granted by President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an’s Justice and Development Party. They participated in building the Istanbul Airport, where a mass protest broke out in 2018 after several workers died on site. Four Cengiz Holding executives made the *Forbes* list of 100 richest Turks in 2020.

Workers must reject the lie that there is no money for decent wages and conditions. Throughout the pandemic, governments in Turkey and around the world have refused to implement a scientific lockdown policy and imposed “herd immunity” policies, leading to massive contagion and over 3 million deaths. No

significant support was given to workers or small business owners, as state officials claimed a lockdown long enough to halt the virus was too expensive.

However, trillions of dollars internationally and hundreds of billions of lira in Turkey have been transferred to banks and corporations over the past year. In 2020, electricity companies received 2.2 billion TL, a figure expected to rise to 3 billion in 2021. Moreover, though state-owned Elektrik Üretim A? cut prices of electricity sold to distribution companies in April, companies like Beda? did not pass the savings on to consumers but instead massively increased their profits.

Striking Beda? workers are challenging not only Beda? management and its powerful backers, but also the trade unions. In a social media group, strikers repeatedly denounced the union for acting like a corporate police force. Its collaboration with management emerged clearly last week: after arbitration ended on April 14, the union waited over two weeks, until a partial lockdown began on Friday, to notify the workers of the contract. This was clearly aimed at preventing strike action.

On Friday, workers rebelled against the union. Discussing whether to reverse the decision to strike as the union pressed workers to return to work on Monday, one worker said: “Unless we continue this decision, we will lose. Monday we will be told to get to work, but we shouldn’t do it this time.”

The union’s back-to-work order Monday caused great anger among workers: “We rebelled, why now listen to the union that sold us out?”

Workers denounced union officials for doing nothing but drawing generous salaries based on workers’ union dues: “Those who receive a salary of around 10,000 TL thanks to union dues are trying to convince us to [return to work] instead of supporting the action.”

Many stressed the need to act independently of the union: “Now that the union is not doing its job, it is up to us, I think we can prepare our own decisions and demands” and “Let’s not expect anything from the union, let’s make our own decisions now.”

Workers who worked on Monday, due to the confusion created by the union, faced threats from management. It read workers a statement stressing the state ban on strikes in the electricity sector and threatened a wage cut and legal action against workers

taking “illegal action.”

The Tes-?? union issued a statement declaring, “We do not have a decision to stop work for Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday.” This prompted more comments from workers that the union is a corporate police force. Due to this union sabotage, the work stoppage has turned into a work-to-rule action, which company-union collaboration has so far failed to stop.

To take control of the struggle from Tes-??, workers need to build an independent, rank-and-file committee. The wildcat strike has shown the power of the workers. However, it cannot be mobilized if union bureaucrats can continue misleading and cheating workers in line with back-channel talks with management, shareholders and the state.

Workers should reject union calls to end the strike and wait until Thursday. The unions ceased decades ago to be workers’ organizations, turning into extensions of management and the state. This also applies to D?SK (the Turkish Confederation of Progressive Unions), which has abandoned its pledge to strike against working in unsafe factories during the pandemic and instead held a joint press conference with Turkish Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu before May Day.

Beda? workers are engaging a struggle not only against management and the unions, but the state and international finance capital, which will be violently hostile to a strike in Turkey’s economic capital. Their best allies in this struggle are broader layers of workers opposed to poverty wages and “herd immunity” policies, in Turkey and internationally. It is to mobilize and unify this opposition that the ICFI is calling workers in struggle to join and build the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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