

Istanbul electricity workers' struggle at the crossroads

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After 2,000 workers at Bo?aziçi Elektrik Da?ıtım A? (Beda?), a company distributing electricity to the European side of Istanbul, went on a wildcat strike in defiance of an official ban on strike activity in the electricity sector last Friday, several procapitalist forces are trying to drown their struggle in the dead end of trade unionism.

The *World Socialist Web Site* explained that the only way forward is building an independent, rank-and-file committee as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and called on workers to “reject union calls to end the strike and wait until Thursday.” As the WSWs had previously warned, the Tes-?? union, affiliated to Türk-??, completely ended the wildcat strike struggle and work-to-rule action, ordering a return to work in a statement released on Wednesday.

In its statement, Tes-?? announced that the state Supreme Arbitration Council’s (YHK) binding arbitration mandating low wages for Beda? workers “disrupts work peace, tranquility and productivity in our workplaces that have been created with mutual respect and dialogue over the years.” The union added that it had requested to meet with the company in order to “re-establish work peace stronger without further damage” and that the meeting will take place in one month, on June 4.

This sellout statement expresses the great fear by the trade unions, the ruling class and its state. Working in the critical energy sector in Turkey’s economic capital to provide electricity to nearly 5 million subscribers including businesses, the Beda? workers’ militant struggle will inspire other workers, in Turkey and internationally, to oppose the deadly “herd immunity” policies and mounting poverty and social inequality amid the global COVID-19 pandemic. This can trigger an uncontrolled explosion of class struggle threatening the institutions of class rule, including the trade unions, and the capitalist system as a whole.

Tes-??, a union linked to the Türk-?? who signed the YHK’s decision on the 6 percent miserly agreement for the workers, is completely discredited. Workers are looking for a way forward. Under these conditions, capitalist political forces of all different colors, including the pseudo-left, have been mobilized to lead workers into the dead end of procapitalist trade unionism.

Mahmud Altunsoy, president of Enerji-??, a union linked to the progovernment Islamist Hak-?? confederation, posted a video calling on Beda? workers to join his union. In it, he unintentionally exposed the corruption and bankruptcy of all Turkey’s unions.

Criticizing Tes-??, he said it “used the financial power it

obtained from workers’ dues to [build] hotels, holiday villages and [private] hospitals.” Then he continued to threaten workers against militant class struggle, as if he was a corporate or government official, “Confusion and collision will cause no solution, only destruction and disappointment. The work you have done is under the legal ban on strikes. Work stoppage or work-to-rule action puts you in an unfair situation.”

In fact, if the prohibition of strikes imposed by the state in the energy sector is accepted as unchallengeable, it is accepted from the outset that there is no way for workers to struggle for their social and economic rights. However, the right to strike in Turkey, as in many countries of the world, has been gained in “illegal” or wildcat strikes by workers against the companies and the state.

Unions who accept this ban at Beda? aim to extract 300,000 to 400,000 Turkish lira (US\$35,000 to \$50,000) per month from around 2,500 workers, who only earn US\$385. This enormous amount, which cannot legally be used to support workers struggles, is seen as the price the company is willing to pay to prevent any actual strike action.

Altunsoy’s words that workers’ dues are invested in various profitable capitalist businesses by unions is one of the common features of unions based on the exploitation of workers and the capitalist nation-state system. The unions ceased decades ago to be workers organizations, having turned into extensions of management and the state.

Dennis Williams, former president of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union in the United States, was sentenced to two years in prison this week for embezzling union funds. Dues go not only to the incomes of union executives, whose annual “legal” earnings are hundreds of thousands of dollars. They are also invested in the stock market, to buy company shares and sit on company management or supervisory boards all over the world.

The global process of the unions’ integration with management and the state is also valid for Turkey. Union executives are part of the affiliated upper middle class, and they owe this to the growing exploitation of the working class.

Although the financial situation of unions in Turkey is largely in the dark, data shows that their situation is not different from their American or European counterparts. According to the data compiled by the daily *Evrensel*, it was revealed that in 2019, the monthly salary of the chairman of Özçelik-?? union affiliated to Hak-?? was between 30,000 or 50,000 Turkish liras.

The chairman of the ?eker-?? union affiliated to Türk-?? also

bought a car worth 1 million Turkish lira in 2018. In Turkey, where the minimum wage is 2,825 Turkish lira, it is not only the executives of Hak-?? or Türk-?? confederations who receive tens of thousands of liras to suppress the class struggle.

It is also true for the pro-opposition D?SK (Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions), which is a partner of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation run by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) of the ruling grand coalition in Germany.

The Lastik-?? union, affiliated to D?SK, is one of the hotel-owning unions in Turkey. While the union's total dues income in 2019 was approximately 21.4 million lira, the total salary and bonus expenses of the union executives were around 4.5 million lira. As for Birle?ik Metal-??, its dues income in the first 10 months of 2019 was 24 million lira, and the salaries and expenses of the five top executives were recorded at 975,000 liras.

This role of unions, which serve as the labor police of companies worldwide, has been most strikingly demonstrated during the pandemic, as the “herd immunity” policies of the ruling elites led to massive contagion and over 3 million deaths. The German and French unions signed the European Union bailouts and oversaw the back-to-work campaign under unsafe conditions.

The same reactionary collaboration was followed by the unions in Turkey. Türk-?? and Hak-?? issued a joint statement with the Confederation of Employers Unions of Turkey (T?SK) and thanked President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an for his response to the pandemic. However, this herd immunity response has led to the infection of millions and the deaths of tens of thousands, including more than 400 health care workers, from COVID-19.

The D?SK was complicit in this “social murder” policy. As millions of workers lost their jobs and incomes, the D?SK hailed the “unpaid leave” bill, calling it a “confirmation of our proposals.” It has abandoned its pledge to strike against attempts to keep workers on the job in unsafe factories doing nonessential production during the pandemic, and has increasingly focused on improving its relations with the state against the working class.

Now, Enerji-Sen, affiliated with D?SK, is being advanced as a possible alternative to the Beda? workers. It is a pseudo-left tendency trying to plunge the struggle of the Beda? workers into the swamp of unionism and claims that joining a new union other than these confederations is the only solution. It claims it is impossible for workers to do anything independently of the unions. Instead of organizing outside of the unions to continue Friday's wildcat strike struggle and to spread it on specific social and economic demands, they propose to move to a new union and focus on the “additional protocol” and the “legal” struggle.

This bankrupt approach serves to undermine the militant struggle of the Beda? workers and will ultimately bring nothing but defeat. It also reveals the procapitalist and nationalist character of the pseudo-left. They impose on workers the very same policies as the right-wing union officials.

David North, the chairman of the International Editorial Board of the WSWs, explained in his essay “Why are trade unions hostile to socialism?”:

must aim to make its members respect that legality.”

The defense of legality means the suppression of the class struggle. That is why the trade unions ultimately undermine their ability to achieve even the limited aims to which they are officially dedicated. Herein lies the contradiction upon which trade unionism flounders. The conflict between the trade unions and the revolutionary movement arises not, in any fundamental sense, from the faults and failings of the trade union leaders—though both are to be found in abundant supply—but from the nature of the trade unions themselves. At the heart of this conflict lies the organic opposition of the trade unions to the development and extension of the class struggle. That opposition becomes all the more determined, bitter and deadly at the point where the class struggle appears to threaten the production relations of capitalism, that is, the socioeconomic foundations of trade unionism itself.

The only revolutionary movement that tells the truth to the working class is the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Beda? workers are an integral part of, not only the broader layer of 250,000 energy workers but also, the Turkish and international working class. Their interests can be advanced only based on a revolutionary, international program, not a trade union and national one.

This means, above all, the establishment of a rank-and-file committee independent of procapitalist unions in preparation for a political struggle against management and the state behind it. This committee should be a part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and must appeal to the whole working class in Turkey and internationally to challenge the strike ban and to gain its demands.

Lasting social and economic gains for energy workers and other sections of the working class require the expropriation of the energy companies and other major industries under the democratic control of the working class. This means a fight for workers' power and the socialist reorganization of the global economy on the basis of the needs of society, not private profit.



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As Gramsci noted, “The union represents legality and