Turkish TPI workers sacked after rebelling against union-backed contract

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TPI Composites workers in Turkey, who were preparing to go on strike on June 22, are facing layoffs after the Petrol-?? union affiliated with the Türk-?? confederation secretly signed a sellout contract at the beginning of June.

Those who were dismissed were workers who came to the fore in mass protests against the agreement, who came into conflict with the union and resigned from it. These layoffs were imposed by the company in open collaboration with the union.

The union betrayal and mass protest by workers at TPI, a US-based global wind-blade manufacturer, comes shortly after Beda? workers in Istanbul went on a wildcat strike, 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 surge of militancy among workers in Turkey is part of an international resurgence of the class struggle. The Volvo strike in the US is leading this global upsurge, where workers formed a rank-and-file committee to advance their demands and conduct the fight independently of the pro-company United Auto Workers (UAW) union.

The collective bargaining process at TPI started more than five months ago, and workers carried out workplace actions for 60 days after the negotiations failed. During this period, the workers took actions such as walking in the factory, not working overtime and making noise in the cafeteria. The union aimed to appease the workers with such ineffective “actions.”

At the end of May, due to the failure to reach an agreement in the contract negotiations for the TPI factories in Çi?li Sasal? and Menemen Free Zone, Izmir, where a total of 3,800 workers are employed, the union announced that the strike would begin on June 22.

In his statement on the negotiations, Petrol-?? Izmir head Orhan Zengin said: “We have reached a consensus on almost all items [in the contract] except the wages, but we have a problem on the wages. … We asked for a 30 percent raise, but the offer was 20 percent.” He also added “Our strike will begin on June 22. Until then, we are open to negotiations.”

In Turkey, where the official inflation rate is 16 percent and the real rate is over 30 percent, a 30 percent wage increase would only prevent a decline in real wages. However, on June 3, the union hurriedly signed a contract with the company without informing the workers or holding any votes.

As a clear sign of contempt to workers, the union did not even bother to explain to them that it had signed a contract: the workers learned of it from a shift supervisor in the factory.

The union’s betrayal caused great anger among TPI workers.

Zengin made a statement to appease the workers at a factory, claiming that they signed the contract in Ankara under the authority of the Labour Ministry. The union bureaucrat baldly demanded total submission to the state: “Since we are conducting the negotiation in the eye of the Ministry, there is no opportunity for discussion. You have to bow down. ... We are the most numerous, we have the power, but you bow to the law and order there. There is nothing else to do.”

The workers, angry at the union’s betrayal, protested and stormed out before Zengin could finish his speech. Petrol-?? announced on its website that it had signed the agreement two days later, on June 5, but refrained from giving any details on the content of the contract.

A worker told the daily *Evrensel*: “There is great anger at the factory ... Everyone is waiting for the

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resignation of the local head, Orhan Zengin. They want the representatives to resign. There is chaos in the factory, we feel betrayed. We want the union leadership, including the representatives in the factory, to resign and to have an early election."

TPI Composites is one of the world's leading wind blade manufacturers, having facilities in the US, Mexico, Denmark, Turkey, China and India with nearly 15,000 workers in total. According to its own reports, TPI Composites "accounted for approximately 32 percent of all sold onshore wind blades on a MW-basis globally excluding China in 2020."

Amid a raging global pandemic, it "reached a record high" in 2020, "with nearly $1.7 billion in net sales and more than 10,600 wind blades produced," in collaboration with the unions to keep workers on the job to create profits despite unsafe conditions.

After the pro-company contract was signed, TPI Composites took action to punish workers who dared to challenge their collaboration with the union. Workers said a total of 32 workers in the two factories were sent on unpaid leave. In addition, two workers in one factory were dismissed for the "crime" of disrupting production; another three were dismissed without any explanation. The total number of laid off workers is said to be 10.

Workers showed their reaction on a Facebook page named the Association of Petrochemical Workers. One worker wrote, "We have to show that we are not slaves. If we are workers, we must nail what is rightfully ours. … We will be strong and organized! Then there will be no voices of threats, pressure, or other fears."

Another one stated, "The management and the union lords stole our children's happiness, stole their needs. Moreover, one [union] is getting rich with our dues and the other [company] with our sweat. Let's get into action now!" One other TPI worker also announced their new demands: "Take back those who were fired. 10 percent additional raise. Orhan Zengin should resign. Working conditions should be improved."

One worker accused the union of giving a list of workers who should be laid off by the company. "We were fired because we opposed [the union-backed contract]. The union gave our names to the management as trouble makers, and then the company fired us."

Another worker wrote, "The sole purpose of trade union officials in the 21st century is to fill their own pockets."

As the social onslaught of the ruling class escalates amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused millions of deaths due to their herd immunity policy, the working class everywhere is entering into struggle in defiance of corporatist unions.

Against transnational corporations like TPI Composites, which organize production and plan strategy against workers on a global scale with the full support of capitalist governments, workers need an international strategy based on a socialist perspective.

The way forward for TPI workers and other workers entering the struggle internationally is to form their own rank-and-file committees to prepare and coordinate struggles together with their class brothers and sisters around the world. The task is not to organize, on national soil, reforms to the bureaucracy to create a "better union." It means to join in building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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