

Mitsuba auto parts workers occupy factory in Turkey to oppose sackings

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One hundred and twenty workers at the Mitsuba Otomotiv in Gebze, Kocaeli, stopped production on Monday and occupied their factory after nine workers were dismissed for joining the Birleşik Metal union.

Amid an international upsurge in the class struggle, Mitsuba workers demanded the rehiring of their sacked colleagues and recognition of the union. However, the Birleşik Metal union betrayed them, reaching an agreement with Mitsuba yesterday. Mitsuba will recognize the union and pay legally-mandated compensation, but still refuses to rehire the sacked workers.

This important struggle by workers against Mitsuba, a global auto parts giant headquartered in Japan, reflects growing working class opposition to falling living standards during the pandemic.

Mitsuba workers went on a wildcat strike as the September 2021-2023 contract negotiations began, covering approximately 150,000 workers in the metal industry, one of the main sectors of the Turkish economy. The Turkish Employers Association of Metal Industries (MESS) and the Türk Metal union met yesterday.

The talks, expected to last two months, take place in the shadow of the pandemic and the rising cost of living, as workers are forced to go to work to maintain the profits of big business.

Contract negotiations involve global companies and Turkey's largest industrial enterprises, including Fiat (Tofaş), Renault, Ford, Mercedes and Man in automotive, and Arçelik, Bosch and Siemens in white goods and electronics. While MESS represents the companies, three unions (Türk Metal, Birleşik Metal and Özçelik) sit at the negotiating table.

The trump card of MESS, as in previous contracts, is that the government and the unions are on its side. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government has banned all major strikes for years on the grounds of their

“threatening national security,” and unions fear the militant struggle of the workers and possible strikes as much as the companies.

The unions have announced their wage demands. For the first six months of the year, Türk Metal demands a 29.57 percent raise; Birleşik Metal 30.89 percent; and Özçelik 31 percent. They demand a raise equal to the inflation rate plus 3 or 4 percent for the other six months.

These rates, which the unions declare as their starting point in bargaining, are well below the economic losses suffered by the workers during the pandemic. Workers know the company will bargain these demands down during the negotiations, and that if the government bans a possible strike, the official arbitration board will condemn them again to poverty wages.

The annual inflation rate as calculated by the official Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), which is a gross underestimate, rose to 19.58 percent as of September 2021. However, real annual inflation in September was 44.7 percent, according to a study by the independent Inflation Research Group. In other words, even the initial wage rise demands of the unions are below the real rise in prices.

To the daily *Evrensel*, workers spoke angrily about contracts proposed by these pro-company unions. A Kroman Çelik worker and member of Birleşik Metal said, “Even if the raise proposed by the unions today were adopted without negotiation, the average [metal workers] wage would remain below 7,000 Turkish liras even in the largest iron and steel factories.”

A worker at Dostel Makina said, “Although it is said that the ‘announced inflation figures do not reflect the truth,’ it is not correct to take the official inflation as a base. For example, taking the poverty line as a base can be a target. However, even the wage increase demanded today has been overwhelmed under the real inflation.”

One Ford autoworker asked, “While the boss increases

their profit by 114 percent in the pandemic, are we going to face him with this draft contract?” He continued angrily: “Just shame on you! Türk Metal once again showed that it is a boss union, a yellow union! As metal workers, we never and ever accept this draft.”

Iron and steel companies traded on Borsa Istanbul increased their profits by 1,158 percent in the first quarter of 2021. It has been 173 percent for auto companies for the same period.

Both companies and union officials are well aware that workers are determined to go on strike in the event of a dispute. They know that such a strike could spark an explosion in the class struggle, and for this, they rely on the government’s strike ban threats.

The government also fears that a possible strike in the metal industry, which is the backbone of Turkey’s economy, will have an explosive effect, coupled with increasing social opposition to the homicidal official response to the pandemic. Already, the Turkish economy is in a deepening crisis, and workers’ living conditions are in deep decline.

President Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) has issued at least 17 strike postponement decrees since coming to power in 2002. Strikes by 194,000 workers have been postponed—that is, effectively banned. These include strike actions in the metal industry in 2018.

Unions that the government and MESS rely on to contain anger at factories are already discredited among workers. In recent years, the unions have approved one contract after the other, despite workers’ willingness to strike.

Metalworkers’ anger against the unions erupted in wildcat strikes of more than 20,000 workers in 2015, mainly at Renault, Tofaş (Fiat) and Ford. They rebelled against Türk Metal, the largest union in the sector, forming their own action committees. While the unions counseled resignation, Birleşik Metal-İş, a union affiliated to the Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions (DİSK), blocked workers from taking solidarity strike action.

The unions have intensified their cooperation with management during the pandemic, revealing their role as an industrial police against the workers. Forced to work in extremely dangerous pandemic conditions for a year and a half, workers are angry that they and their families are placed at great risk every day. While large-scale outbreaks occurred in hundreds of factories, they were trivialized or covered up.

During the pandemic, the unions only sought to contain

workers’ opposition. In March 2020, as the pandemic began, DİSK threatened to invoke the constitutional right not to work in dangerous conditions if the government did not take necessary steps in 48 hours. Despite the deaths of thousands of workers and their family members due to COVID-19, however, the union did not call a strike. Birleşik Metal-İş chairman Adnan Serdaroğlu personally admitted in August that 20 percent of his union’s members contracted the disease.

This role played by trade unions for decades is not unique to Turkey. There is a growing opposition and militancy among workers worldwide against attacks on their health, working and living conditions amid the pandemic. In particular, US autoworkers have shown their will to fight, repeatedly rejecting pro-company contracts imposed by the unions and forming their own independent rank-and-file committees at Volvo, Dana, and most recently Deere, with the assistance of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Metal workers in Turkey also oppose working in dangerous environments during the pandemic as well as the tier system where the newly-hired receive almost minimum wage, and are ready to strike in order to gain decent wage increases and benefits.

Metalworkers need to take action independently of the unions to impose an eradication strategy that will stop the pandemic and save lives, and to improve declining living conditions. In every factory and workplace, workers must elect their own representatives and formulate their own demands. Rank-and-file committees will provide workers with real information, unite all metalworkers, and form the basis for the development of a genuine class struggle.



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