

Tram and subway workers strike in Izmir, Turkey's third-largest city

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Amid a sharp upsurge in the class struggle, 627 subway and tram workers at Metro A?, owned by the Izmir Metropolitan Municipality, are to go on strike Friday. A possible shutdown of the subway, used by approximately 2 million people per day, is expected to lock traffic in Izmir, Turkey's third largest city.

Contract talks between the Social Democrat Public Employers Union (Sodem-Sen), representing the municipality, and the Demiryol-?? union, affiliated to the Türk-?? confederation, have continued since April. Declaring that no agreement could be reached on nine of 69 items, the union announced a strike on 1 October.

The impending subway strike in Izmir comes amid a surge of class struggle in Turkey and internationally, as the pandemic intensifies and workers' living standards suffer unprecedented declines. Over 10,000 US workers are on strike at farm and construction equipment maker John Deere, and approximately 170,000 metal workers in South Africa have been striking for two weeks. In Brazil, 7,600 General Motors autoworkers voted overwhelmingly to continue their strike, defying the union and courts.

In Turkey, approximately 120 workers at the Mitsuba Otomotiv factory in Gebze, Kocaeli, stopped production and occupied the factory on October 9 after workers were dismissed for joining the Birle?ik Metal-?? union.

Yesterday morning, hundreds of petrochemical workers at Petkim, one of Turkey's largest industrial enterprises, started work two hours late to protest company policies that would endanger workers' health. The workers marched in the refinery.

While workers from the Belediye-?? union (Türk-??) in Bak?rköy Municipality in Istanbul are preparing to go on strike on Monday, more than 1,000 workers at GAMAK Motor, also located in Istanbul, laid down tools for half an hour after management rejected to approve the proposed contract. If no agreement is reached within two months, GAMAK workers will go on strike.

As contract negotiations began for approximately 150,000 workers in the metal industry, production shutdowns in auto factories are increasing due to a global microchip supply crisis, leading to attacks on workers' wages by management. The Renault factory in Bursa has announced that it will operate for a week and then stop production for a week, paying only 76 percent of workers' wages.

Doctors of the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) are also organizing actions to protest the government's criminal response to the pandemic and worsening working conditions.

These struggles show that the fight against the pandemic and the class struggle are closely linked, underlining the urgency of uniting them on a global scale by forming independent working-class committees, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Over 30,000 people are officially infected with COVID-19 and more than 200 people die per day in Turkey, while the economic and social crisis, accelerated by the pandemic, continues to deepen.

While 518,000 people applied for unemployment insurance from July to September 2021, the grossly-understated annual inflation rate, as calculated by the official Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), rose to 19.58 percent in September 2021. However, real annual inflation in September was 44.7 percent, according to a study by the independent Inflation Research Group. Millions of working people and their families can barely make ends meet.

According to research by Türk-??, in September, "monthly food expenditure required for a family of four to have a healthy, balanced and adequate diet (the 'hunger limit')" rose to 3,049 Turkish liras. This sum "together with food expenditure, expenditures for clothing, housing (rent, electricity, water, fuel),

transportation, education, health and the total amount of other mandatory monthly other needs (the ‘poverty line’)” has risen to 9,931 TL.

As the minimum wage is 2,825 TL (US\$305; it corresponded US\$385 just in May), most workers are employed for on the minimum wage or slightly above it. This also applies to subway and tram workers in Izmir. In August, a 5-year mechanic received only 3,175 TL, while a 21-year station operator got 3,800 TL, including benefits.

The subway workers, who for decades have suffered from union-sanctioned losses and had to work uninterruptedly during the pandemic, would no longer accept a new sellout contract and conditions of increasing misery. They forced the union to agree to a strike decision that it clearly did not want.

Demiryol-?? Union Izmir Branch President Hamdullah Giral made this clear on October 12, saying: “An agreement was reached on 60 items of our draft contract, which consists of 69 articles, and despite all our good faith efforts on the remaining 9 items, an agreement could not be reached.” He added, “We said give us our due to our employer, who forced us to take a strike decision on September 28, 2021 due to their non-agreement attitude, they did not hear!”

On October 15, the union repeated its anti-strike stance: “As the Demiryol-?? Union, we used all the legal time limits to reach an agreement at the table through peaceful means and in a conciliatory manner in the ongoing contract negotiations.”

The union tried to confuse workers by distinguishing between the management of Metro A?, which belongs to the municipality, and Tunç Soyer, the Mayor of the Metropolitan Municipality, whom it calls “worker-friendly.” Giray, who once again met with the company on Tuesday to prevent a strike, stated: “We reiterate our call for reconciliation. We do not want to make victims of our workers, the municipality or the people of ?zmir. We demand a solution from our toiler president.”

In reality, this distinction is entirely artificial. Soyer, who was elected as mayor from the Republican People's Party (CHP) in the 2019 local elections with the support of various pseudo-left parties, has been chairman of Sodem-Sen since 2014.

The union’s statements are an admission of their complicity in condemning the workers to poverty wages. While union officials announced that “The subway workers, who have not gotten an honest wage for 21 years, do not want to be poor anymore,” they are covering

up the fact that the union itself prevented strikes and signed eight sellout contracts in the last 21 years.

Demiryol-??, which has approximately 21,000 members, is a significant example in Turkey of the international process of transformation of unions into an extension of the state and management. Overseeing the privatization of state railways and the erosion of railway workers’ wages and benefits, the union generates tens of millions of lira by selling properties previously purchased with workers’ dues.

The way unions help companies divide workers and stymie their collective strength is exemplified by the case of Izmir railway workers. Demiryol-?? signed a separate contract six months ago for the workers of the Izmir municipality’s ?ZBAN company, which operates the city’s suburban train.

When approximately 350 ?ZBAN workers struck in December 2018, the union isolated the workers, refusing to mobilize their members in other companies. The 2018 strike also revealed that the CHP was just as hostile to the workers as President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. The CHP attacked the workers from the beginning of the strike, inciting Izmir’s population against them and accused the subway workers of serving the government, only to welcome Erdo?an’s presidential decree ending the strike a month later.

The government’s threat of a strike ban, along with the union’s decades-long pro-corporate record, constitutes a sharp warning to subway workers. They must take matters into their own hands, forming a rank-and-file committee independent of the union to defend their demands, gain the support of Izmir’s inhabitants, and unite their struggles with the rail workers and other sections of the workers in Turkey and internationally.



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