

Wildcat strike erupts against Turkish metal unions' sellout contracts

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Wildcat action is breaking out in protest after contract talks between the Turkish Employers Association of Metal Industries (MESS) and three unions representing approximately 150,000 workers ended in a sell-out deal signed at midnight on Wednesday. The talks involved major Turkish and transnational corporations: Fiat (Tofa?), Renault, Ford, Mercedes and Man in auto, and Arçelik, Bosch and Siemens in white goods and electronics.

Amid deep public anger at surging inflation and deadly pandemic policies, companies and the unions all feared a possible explosion of strikes, defying a likely ban by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government. Birle?ik Metal-??, a union affiliated to the Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions (D?SK), had previously announced that it would go on strike on January 14. Türk Metal, a union affiliated to the Türk-?? confederation, decided to strike, but did not announce its date.

For the first six months of the year, Türk Metal demanded a 29.6 percent raise; Birle?ik Metal-??, 30.9 percent; and Özçelik-??, 31 percent. They demanded a raise equal to the inflation rate plus 3 or 4 percent for the other six months. In the end, according to their joint statement, the unions accepted a 27.4 percent raise for the first six months and an inflation rate raise for the second, third and fourth six months.

This is well below annual inflation in Turkey, which reached 36 percent in December. However, the independent Inflation Research Group (ENAGroup) announced that real annual inflation reached 82 percent. This deal sparked outrage and calls for struggle among metal and auto workers.

Yesterday, hundreds of metalworkers at Çimsata? factory in the southern city of Mersin launched a wildcat strike, defying the sellout agreement,. Protesting Birle?ik Metal-??'s agreement, workers demanded changes including an additional 35 percent raise for the first six months.

This contract not only entails a further decline in living standards as the cost of living surges, but it does not contain any regulation to protect workers' health and lives amid the

pandemic. Turkey is seeing the biggest surge in the pandemic to date, driven by the more infectious Omicron variant. A record daily toll of 74,266 infections were confirmed Tuesday, bring total active cases to 640,000, with factories and schools serving as major vectors of COVID-19.

Nonetheless, Pervil Kavlak, the chairman of Türk Metal, the largest union in the industry, and also general secretary of the Türk-?? confederation, thanked the MESS. He said: "Considering the realities of our country, this contract has been a really successful one. We made history together again," despite the contract falling short of Türk Metal's own demands. In its statement, Birle?ik Metal-?? also claimed that they have achieved "new gains and important benefits."

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges workers to mobilize against these sellout contracts, in line with the Çimsata? workers' courageous initiative. Rank-and-file committees should be formed in the factories, independent of pro-corporate unions. The committees should raise workers' own demands, including the immediate closure of all non-essential workplaces, with full income for workers affected, until measures are put in place to bring the pandemic to an end.

Hundreds of workers denounced Kavlak's statement on Twitter, stating: "We made history again." One worker said: "You've added another BLACK MARK to history, congratulations!" Another wrote: "You did a shell game again. And you say you made history. The [union's proposed] draft was a mess from the very beginning. Shame on you."

Other comments also reflect workers' growing awareness and anger over the labor police role of unions: "History? Who are you kidding?" "Anti-labor union, may you get no benefit from my dues." "Real inflation is 100 percent. The minimum wage was increased by 50 percent. The government called inflation 36 percent. We received 27.44 percent in the contract. Now if this isn't called sellout, what is? Nothing comes without a price, folks." "Yes, you made history, and history will not forget your mockery. Every

penny of those monthly dues should be haram [forbidden].”

The reactions to the Birle?ik Metal-?? union, which was defended by pseudo-left organizations, were similar: “[Union chairman] Adnan Serdaro?lu is the person who says that he will not sign without the workers’ consent and then sells out workers from whom he receives dues. Shame on you, how are you going to face these workers?” “That is, three unions have merged and sold workers.” “You sold out the workers very well, congratulations. Also, the three of you unite to be a union, no need to be separate, because you are all the same.”

One worker also reacted, “There can be no history like this! BOSS UNION!” and called for struggle: “The metal storm is coming.”

“Metal storm” refers to the wildcat wave of strikes in 2015, when metalworkers’ anger against the unions erupted. More than 20,000 workers mainly at Renault, Tofa? (Fiat) and Ford factories rebelled against Türk Metal, forming their own action committees. However, Birle?ik Metal-?? blocked workers from taking solidarity strike action.

Now, unions openly boast that they defend corporate profits at the expense of workers’ lives. On this subject, Türk Metal Chairman Kavlak said, “We worked at the expense of our lives. We worked to death,” boasting that the metal industry became the export leader during the pandemic. Birle?ik Metal-?? also boasted: “Even at the peak of the pandemic, the workers kept the wheels turning and worked at the expense of their lives. The resulting high profits are due to this self-sacrificing work of the workers.”

These are admissions that workers were sent to their deaths for the sake of capitalist profit during the pandemic. The D?SK union confederation threatened to invoke the constitutional right not to work in dangerous conditions if the government did not act in 48 hours. Despite the deaths of thousands of workers and their family members from COVID-19, however, it did not call a strike. Instead, it helped oversee deadly working conditions.

Thanks to them, 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. Ford Otosan made 1.89 billion Turkish lira profit in the third quarter of 2021.

For this flow of profits to continue uninterrupted, with thousands more killed and millions more infected, unions are desperate to strangle strikes in the strategic metals industry. In fact, as a part of the international upsurge in the class struggle, including by teachers and students against governments’ criminal handling of the pandemic, wildcat stoppages have emerged in various workplaces as health workers went on strike across Turkey in December.

However, unions receive critical assistance from pseudo-

left organizations when collaborating with companies to suppress the class struggle. One of these organizations is the Pabloite Revolutionary Workers’ Party (D?P), which seeks to keep the workers under the control of the unions, especially D?SK and Birle?ik Metal-??.

The D?P’s paper, *Gerçek*, tried to subordinate the workers to the leadership and demands of the unions from the beginning of the contract negotiations. In an article published after the unions announced their draft contracts in August, it defended the inadequate raises that the unions proposed but that workers rejected from the beginning: “Draft contracts can and will always be criticized, but they have now been announced. After this time, it is necessary to adopt the drafts and prepare a struggle that will bring MESS to its knees.”

Shifting its position as workers increasingly demanded to change the contract drafts, D?P advised workers to back Birle?ik Metal-?? in early December: “It is obvious that the yellow union Türk Metal will not update its draft unless there is too much pressure. Here, the responsibility rests on the shoulders of the Birle?ik Metal-?? union affiliated to D?SK.”

After the sellout agreement on January 12, D?P criticized Türk Metal and did not hesitate to speak in favor of Birlesik Metal-??, which signed the same contract: “We should point out that it was the right attitude that Birle?ik Metal took in the decision to implement a strike for January 14, and that it carried out protest actions especially in the factories in Gebze, in particular by stopping the work.”

Workers must reject the pro-corporate unions and the contracts they impose, as well as the pseudo-left organizations that try to bind them to the unions. The simmering anger in the factories and workplaces must be turned into a conscious mass movement to improve living conditions and take the necessary scientific public health measures, including stopping non-essential production to end the pandemic.



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