

Turkish iron miners launch wildcat strike for wages and benefits

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About 700 workers at iron ore mines at Divri?i in Turkey's Sivas province stopped work on Monday after the company rejected their demands for wages and benefits. Miners organized a march to the district center.

According to the local *Divri ? i Gazetesi*, the mine, owned by the OYAK-Erdemir Maden (Ermaden) company, is operated by the Çiftay subcontractor company. The workers, through their representatives, had been meeting with management on their wage and benefit demands for about 15 days. They halted production on Monday after management rejected their demands. This is reportedly the first work stoppage in this facility in nearly 50 years.

These nonunion miners' wildcat strike is part of an emerging international movement in the working class against rising living costs and deadly pandemic policies.

As the Omicron variant spreads rapidly, strikes and protests against the unsafe reopening of schools were held in the US, France, Italy and Greece last week, while 200,000 power-loom workers in India went on indefinite strike. Mass protests and strikes have occurred across the country against the growing poverty in Lebanon .

The wildcat strike in Divri?i is the third mass stoppage in Turkey in 2022. In the first week of the new year, approximately 200 women workers working at the Fruit and Vegetable Market in Tarsus stopped work, demanding a wage increase. This was followed by a wildcat strike of nearly 800 metalworkers at the Çimsata? factory in Mersin last week. They rejected a sellout contract between the Turkish Employers Association of Metal Industries (MESS) and three unions representing approximately 150,000 workers.

Annual inflation in Turkey reached 36 percent in

December, but the independent Inflation Research Group (ENA Group) announced that real annual inflation reached 82 percent. When the depreciation of the Turkish lira against the US dollar is added to this, the living standards of millions of workers suffered a rapid decline.

While President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an's government has raised the minimum wage by 50 percent for 2022 in the face of growing social anger, larger sections of the working class, from health workers to educators and metal workers, are taking action.

Discontent and opposition within the working class is deepening as capitalist governments internationally end the pretense of trying to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. In line with the interests of the ruling class, Erdo?an follows the same "herd immunity" policy as his allies in the US and Europe, leading to mass infections and deaths.

The miners closed the Cürek-Divri?i highway on Monday to go to the Ermaden company headquarters and marched towards Divri?i, which is about 10 kilometers away. Police forces later intervened to block their march on the highway.

Çiftay management responded to the workers' mass and militant action with threats. The company threatened layoffs in a WhatsApp message to workers on Monday evening, writing: "Today, it has been determined that you did not go to work in violation of the contract and the law. If you do not start work, we warn you that we will use all our legal rights, including layoffs as a last resort."

The company also threatened to bring in scabs, stating: "New shift teams are being formed to go down into the mine. Those who want to keep their jobs must start work in their shifts. There will be no deductions

from the wages and premiums of the employees who return to work at the start of the shift, and no action will be taken regarding production losses.”

Hundreds of miners who challenged these threats did not go down to the mine at night, and the strike continued yesterday. Gathering in front of the mine on Tuesday morning, workers decided to continue the action en masse.

After Independent Miners Union representatives came and spoke to the strikers, management announced the sacking of all the miners. Police and gendarmerie forces were also deployed around the mine.

At the time of this writing, the company has rejected the workers’ demands, and workers are planning to march to the Divri?i center and organize a protest in the district square with their families, according to the *Divri?i Gazetesi*.

Workers reportedly receive only 5,250 TL (\$390) per month and are demanding a 51 percent increase in their wages, as well as improvements in their benefits. According to the Umut-Sen trade union’s Twitter account, there are demands such as setting a minimum base pay of 8,000 TL, a raise for the night shift, a raise every six months and granting leave and bonuses during the holidays.

While a state-owned enterprise began iron ore production in the Divri?i region in 1938, it was completely privatized in 2006 and sold to OYAK, the Turkish army’s pension fund and one of the country’s largest industrial groups. OYAK, a partner of the Renault factory in Bursa, owns the Erdemir iron and steel factory and various mining companies, including Erdemir Maden. It also has holdings in finance.

According to a company statement, “Today, Erdemir Maden, which has Turkey’s first and only iron ore pelletizing plant, realizes 35 percent of our country’s iron ore production and meets 13 percent of Turkey’s iron ore needs on its own.” The company, which is the country’s largest iron mine owner and producer, “has a total of 11 mining sites, 9 iron, 1 coal and 1 manganese field, in addition to the concentration and pellet facilities in Sivas Divri?i.”

In the Divri?i iron mines, built with public funds in the 1930s and expanded for decades with the exploitation of the labor of generations of workers, miners today work in the most difficult conditions, earning less than half the poverty line, which is already

over 13,000 Turkish liras.

Divri?i iron ore miners are part of a vast army of workers in iron ore mines and steel plants in Turkey and internationally that are closely linked through production chains.

In a Perspective article on last year’s global wave of miners strikes, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote: “Miners occupy a critical position in the global capitalist economy. They produce the primary materials needed for cell phones, batteries, car parts, conductors and other advanced technology, without which the entire world economy grinds to a halt.”

The iron ore miners in Divri?i are again part of an emerging international movement. From the Americas to Europe, from Asia to Australia, workers are mobilizing by forming their own rank-and-file committees and uniting in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) launched last year.

Divri?i iron ore miners should also form a democratically elected rank-and-file committee to maintain the fight for their demands and mobilize support from other miners, metal workers and other sections of the working class in Turkey and internationally.



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