Wildcat strikes against high prices spread across Turkey amid pandemic

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As President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an's government lifts remaining measures against COVID-19 and adopts a "herd immunity" policy, wildcat strikes against skyrocketing living costs are spreading across Turkey.

These strikes are part of a developing global movement in the working class against the deadly pandemic policies of the ruling class and its economic and social consequences. This movement could impose a change of pandemic policy, as the *World Socialist Web Site* recently explained in its New Year statement: "The implementation of a scientifically guided and progressive response to the pandemic is possible only to the extent that these policies find the necessary social foundation in a mass movement of the working class on a global scale."

While the number of daily cases in Turkey exceeded 100,000 for the first time on Tuesday and the test positivity rate approached 25 percent, the Erdo?an government, especially Health Minister Fahrettin Koca, has repeatedly declared there is "nothing to worry about."

Alongside attempts to "normalize" an official daily death toll of about 200 from a preventable disease, the ever increasing cost of living is fueling anger and opposition among millions of workers.

Official annual inflation rose to 36 percent in December, but real inflation exceeded 82 percent, according to a study by the independent Inflation Research Group (ENAGroup). Moreover, January inflation is expected to be much higher. Prices for electricity, rent and staple foods have risen by more than 100 percent, and millions of working class families cannot make ends meet.

Inflation will massively depreciated the 50 percent increase in the minimum wage for 2022. While the government boasts of this raise, which was below even the real annual inflation rate, the pro-government Türk-?? confederation announced that in January 2022, the "hunger limit" ("monthly food expenditures required for a family of four to have a healthy, balanced and adequate diet") rose to 4,249 Turkish lira ($315). This is precisely the new minimum wage. According to the report, the poverty line rose to 13,843 TL ($1,025).

Under these conditions, ever growing sections of workers are going on wildcat strikes against insufficient wage raises and the ongoing fall in living standards. Only one month into 2022, Turkey has seen a wave of wildcat strikes surpassing recent strike activity in an entire year. The common feature of these strikes is that they are emerging largely as rank-and-file movements of nonunion workers, independent of the unions.

Among the dozens of wildcat strikes erupting in Turkey this year, there are:

• In the first week of the new year, approximately 200 women workers at the Fruit and Vegetable Market in the Tarsus district of the southern city of Mersin stopped work, demanding a wage increase.

• On January 12, metal workers at the Çimsata? factory in Mersin rejected a sellout contract between the Turkish Employers Association of Metal Industries (MESS) and three unions representing around 150,000 workers and stopped working. The wildcat strike by over 700 workers was ended with collaboration between the management and Birle?ik Metal-?? union affiliated to D?SK, and 13 workers were dismissed.

• On January 17, about 700 workers at the iron ore mines at Divri?i in Turkey's central Sivas province stopped work after the company rejected demands for increases in wages and benefits. The nearly three-day walkout ended when management made some concessions while continuing to reject certain demands.

• On January 19, over 2,300 workers at the Farplas Otomotiv auto factory in Gebze, Kocaeli stopped production, protesting low raises. Farplas management, which has factories in seven countries and supplies parts to companies such as Ford, Mercedes, Renault, Volvo and Tesla, pledged in a meeting with workers' representatives that wages would be increased and no workers would be laid off. However, nearly 150 workers who became members of Birle?ik Metal-?? union in this process were sacked. In response, workers occupied the factory at the end of January.

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More than 100 workers and several union officials were beaten and detained in a massive morning police raid. Workers from nearby factories came to show solidarity.

• At the end of January, 40 miners working in the southeastern city of ??rnak stopped work, demanding a wage increase. According to the Mezopotamya Agency, "Workers stopped working on the grounds that their salaries were not raised, and they work for low wages."

• Wildcat strikes are spreading especially among cargo delivery couriers. On January 25, thousands of car couriers working as independent delivery contractors at Trendyol, Turkey's largest e-commerce platform, rejected an 11 percent wage increase offered by the company and stopped work nationwide. Trendyol couriers, who demanded a 50 percent raise, received a 38 percent increase after the strike. This also inspired workers in other cargo companies to strike.

• On the same day, nearly 60 independent couriers at Aras Kargo in the western city of Denizli protested a 10 percent salary increase.

• Thousands of couriers at Yemek Sepeti have continued a wildcat strike for days, demanding a 5,500 TL salary, benefits and the recognition of a union. Couriers held a mass protest before the company's headquarters in Istanbul yesterday.

• Couriers at Hepsijet also refused a 28 percent salary increase and stopped working in cities such as Istanbul and Ankara. They are demanding the same salary as Trendyol couriers.

• Couriers at Scotty also rejected a 22 percent raise offer and closed their contacts. They organized a protest in front of company headquarters in Istanbul and demanded a 40 percent salary increase.

• Couriers working at Yurtiçi Kargo, one of Turkey's largest cargo companies, also closed their contacts on Tuesday, demanding a wage increase. Workers rejected a 17 percent raise offer and demanded a 40 percent raise, as well as the return of the dismissed strikers.

• Workers at the Alpin Socks factory in Istanbul's Beylikdüzü district, which produces for Adidas, Decathlon, Carrefour and H&M, stopped working after an insufficient wage raise was announced on Tuesday. After a meeting between workers' representatives and the company boss on Wednesday morning, the company accepted demands for a raise of 2,500 TL and a no-layoff pledge. This triggered wildcat strikes at several other socks factories in Istanbul.

• On Tuesday, workers at K?z?lay's beverage products factory in the eastern city of Erzincan refused a 22 percent raise and stopped production. Another 150 workers at the K?z?lay Mineral Water Factory in the western city of Afyonkarahisar went on a wildcat strike demanding a decent raise, the return of benefits that had been cut, and the recognition of their union. Management reportedly called in gendarmerie (militarized police) units to the factory.

• Eighty workers working in the packaging department of Polibak, which is located in the Çi?li district of ?zmir and one of Turkey's 500 largest industrial enterprises, stopped production on Tuesday, demanding a wage increase. According to the weekly *K?z?l Bayrak*, after a two-hour protest, workers returned to work and gave the management a week to meet their demands.

• After working without pay for two months, 250 construction workers at the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, built by Russian state company Rosatom, stopped work. Gendarmerie units were reportedly dispatched to the construction site. A worker told the daily *Sözcü* yesterday: "We haven't received our salaries for two months, and we have been in action for four days. There will be a mass layoff tomorrow because we took action. They will dismiss us unconditionally." While thousands of workers have been divided because of the company's use of many subcontractors, they all have held previous protests over unpaid wages, horrible working and accommodation conditions.

• Opposition to the increased living costs and the deadly pandemic policy is also growing among doctors and other health care workers. On January 21, several thousand doctors went on a one-day strike, and on February 8, health care workers are preparing for a nationwide strike. Family physicians also announced that there will be a two-day work stoppage on February 17-18.

This working class movement, which developed largely independently of the unions, will only suffocate under the control of the pro-capitalist trade unions.

The fight against the rising cost of living and social inequality is inseparable from the fight against the pandemic and the world capitalist system. This struggle is international in nature and must be anti-capitalist. The *World Socialist Web Site* urges all workers entering this struggle to form independent rank-and-file committees and unite under the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

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