

“There should be no borders. We want a world where we can live in fraternity”

Striking ship-breaking workers hold a mass rally in Aliağa, Turkey

Our reporters
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Striking Turkish ship-breaking workers organized a rally attended by hundreds of people in Aliağa’s Democracy Square yesterday, demanding wage increases and better working conditions. Their wildcat strike began on February 11.

The families and supporters of the strikers attended the rally. These non-union workers elected representatives in each yard after the strike began, forming a rank-and-file committee.

The wildcat strike in Aliağa is part of a developing movement within the international working class against the economic and social consequences of deadly official policies on the pandemic. This has seen a wave of wildcat strikes spread across Turkey.

This year, more than 70 wildcat strikes have shaken Turkey from the mining to metal and auto sectors, from textile to health sector. Most recently, family physicians struck on February 17-18 for wages and benefits. Wildcat strikes erupted in four different textile plants in the southeastern city of Gaziantep on February 18.

Spontaneous protests erupted against rising electricity prices in cities including A?r?, Hakkari, Mu?la and Bursa in recent weeks, and a mass rally was organized in Istanbul yesterday under the slogan “We cannot make a living,” opposing skyrocketing living costs.

As COVID-19 rages on and the government removes all remaining measures against it, workers are forced to work in impossible conditions. As corporate and financial elites turn the pandemic into an unprecedented profit bonanza, workers are forced back to work, risking infection and death while suffering massive falls in living standards.

According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), official annual inflation last month hit 48 percent, the highest since the 2001 crisis. The independent Inflation

Research Group (ENAG) announced that the actual rate was 114 percent. According to the pro-government Türk-?? union confederation, as of January 2022, the poverty line for a family of four in Turkey reached 13,843 liras (\$1,015). However, the minimum wage for millions of workers is only 4,250 TL (\$315).

These conditions triggered the wildcat strikes in Aliağa, where large petrochemical as well as ship-breaking operations are located.

The Aliağa strikes have exposed the pro-capitalist and anti-working class character of the unions more than ever before. The Petrol-?? union, affiliated to the Türk-?? confederation and present in Aliağa’s giant petrochemical facilities, and the D?SK confederation are working to prevent their members from entering into struggle alongside striking ship-breaking workers. They refuse to mobilize their members, who are ready to take action.

The rally started with a minute’s silence for workers who lost their lives at work from insufficient occupational safety measures due to capitalists’ drive for profit at all costs. In the past year alone, four ship-breaking workers lost their lives there.

A workers’ representative read the strikers’ joint statement, which declared: “We demand humane working and living conditions. We do not accept the life and working conditions that the shipyard bosses have imposed us for years.”

Expressing that the ship-breaking yards area in Aliağa is the world’s third-largest shipyard and the only ship-breaking yard in Europe, the statement continued: “Here we are talking about an annual business volume of \$200 million. Shipyard bosses are breaking profit records... We are overwhelmed by rising inflation every day. We want a humane, livable wage.”

They added that though ship-breaking workers work under difficult conditions, the sector is not classified as heavy industry. Official workplace inspections are only on paper, and workers work every day at risk of death or injury, they said. As for personal protective equipment, companies “either require workers to receive it or do not distribute it in a timely way. We want safe and humane working conditions.”

They continued: “We work here without any security. When it rains or the weather is bad, we do not work, and our wages are cut. Companies do not pay our full insurance premiums. Our overtime wages are being cut. Deregulation dominates here.”

Moreover, they added, shipyards disregard workers’ legal rights such as annual and casual leave: “We say enough is enough! Now we want our rights. Now we are side by side, we are united, and we want our demands to be met as soon as possible. We are resisting for this.”

The ship-breaking workers then listed demands they had formulated together, pledging to continue the strike until their demands were accepted. Their three main demands were:

- 1) A wage increase;
- 2) No workers should be fired for striking;
- 3) Companies should accept their demands and representatives elected by the workers.

At the end of the statement, ship-breaking workers expressed their solidarity with their striking class brothers and sisters elsewhere, emphasizing the unity of the working class: “We are resisting not only for ourselves, but for the entire working class. Today, our brothers and sisters are struggling all over the country. We salute them and their struggles. The messages of solidarity they sent us gave us strength in our struggle. Long live class solidarity. Together we will win. The unity of the workers will defeat capital.”

World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) reporters interviewed Ahmet Saygı, one of the strikers’ representatives who attended the rally.

Asked how the strike began and spread to all 22 ship-breaking facilities, Saygı, who works at Leyal Ship-breaking Company, said: “It developed after a New Year’s raise at a ship-breaking yard was withdrawn under pressure from other companies. Workers whose raises were withdrawn stopped working and asked for our support. We took action. We mobilized to demand the same conditions and wages for all ship-breaking workers.”

Saygı explained: “We demand a daily wage of

350-500 TL (US\$25-37). Last year, the top wage was 350 TL. How can workers live on minimum wage? The amount of money ship-breaking bosses make is astonishing.” He added, “We also want our social facilities to be arranged. In all ship-breaking yards, our changing rooms, bathrooms, cafeterias and toilets are deplorable. We want humane conditions.”

Pointing to deadly conditions in this industry, he stressed that 64 workers lost their lives at work in this area from 2010 to 2018.

Saygı said that he and some of his colleagues were laid off for striking, adding: “1,500 workers participated in the strike. However, this number decreased due to growing pressure from the bosses and difficult living conditions. But we are determined to take this fight to the end.”

When the WSWS asked what conditions ship-breaking workers faced during the pandemic, Saygı replied: “We worked non-stop and very intensely throughout the pandemic. Our friends who were infected continued to work after the official isolation period ended. The pandemic did not adversely affect the ship-breaking industry.”

When the WSWS reporter asked what he thinks about NATO’s war drive against Russia and the danger of world war, Saygı replied as follows: “The pandemic has begun. Prices rose 200 percent. That’s why we’re demanding for this wage raise today. So, in the case of war, it is we workers who will be crushed again.”

Saygı concluded by declaring his opposition to war: “There should be no borders. We want a world where we can live in fraternity.”

Saygı agreed that the Alia strike is part of an emerging movement of the international working class. The WSWS reporter underlined the necessity of uniting these struggles, as workers in many countries increasingly go on strike and form their own independent rank-and-file committees as the ship-breaking workers did. The *World Socialist Web Site* urges workers entering into struggle to form their rank-and-file committees and unite in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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