

Tüpra? workers occupy Alia?a refinery in Turkey to oppose layoffs

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Workers at the Alia?a, Izmir refinery of Turkey's largest enterprise, Tüpra?, have occupied the plant to oppose management's layoff plans since Saturday. Workers mobilized after Petrol-?? union officials approved the layoffs. The occupation of the plant defied a ban on strikes in the petrochemical sector imposed by Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in 2012.

Tüpra?, owned by Koç Holding, one of Turkey's largest conglomerates, had recently informed the union that 88 workers would be laid off from the K?r?kkale, Batman, Kocaeli and Alia?a refineries, which employ around 4,000 workers. Twenty-seven were to be laid off from the Alia?a refinery.

Petrol-?? union headquarters reportedly informed union locals of the names of the workers to be dismissed and told them to restrain action by the workers against the layoffs.

On May 23, a Tüpra? worker in Alia?a told the daily *Evrensel*: "We cannot say that we will fight with the union behind us in processes such as dismissal or punishment by the disciplinary board. Union headquarters has the attitude of let them do it, and the local branch cannot prevent these processes. Tüpra? workers are forced by their union to surrender to the company's pressures."

The union's Alia?a local, which kept silent until the struggle broke out, is cynically claiming to sympathize with the struggle while working to end the wildcat action and prevent a stoppage in production. On Monday morning, Petrol-?? Alia?a Branch President Hasan Toptan's said: "Our protests, which have been going on inside the refinery for two days, will continue in front of the gate as of today, and if necessary in Alia?a Square ..."

But before the workers mobilized on Saturday, branch officials met with company managers, police, and the district governor's office, without calling for any action.

They feared the impact of a mass struggle by workers at this strategically vital enterprise.

After the plant occupation began, Toptan blatantly said that the union "will not negotiate with the employer over 27 people," while Branch Vice President Gökhan Karata? said: "We said that let's follow our 27 friends on the list until January, if they continue to work under the conditions that you bring and present to us with excuses, if they are stealing, we will not stand behind them, but we could not come to a reconciliation point."

This is, in effect, an admission that the union officials secretly discussed the layoffs behind workers' backs. They did not seek to prevent the layoffs, but only to delay them in order to appease the workers.

The transformation of unions into an extension of corporations conspiring against the workers is an international phenomenon. On Saturday night, the United Steelworkers (USW) union in the US sabotaged a strike by Chevron oil refinery workers, calling for an immediate end to the two-month struggle of 500 workers.

Tüpra? workers can place no confidence in the unions. To repel the layoff and other attacks, it is necessary to form rank-and-file committees in the refineries. Only such committees can unite the workers against union attempts to end strikes and production stoppages, divide the workers, and strangle the struggle. They can also appeal for support from petrochemical and other workers more broadly, in Turkey and internationally.

The layoffs come after years of real wage and benefit losses. Petrol-??, which serves as a corporate labor police in this key enterprise, signed a contract last March without workers' approval. With official annual inflation reaching 70 percent, the union accepted a 40 percent increase for the first 6 months of the three-year collective agreement and raises below inflation after that.

During the 2019 contract negotiations, workers independently took action against the company's dictates,

occupying four refineries. Ultimately, the union ended the struggle, and the High Arbitration Council imposed a wage increase below inflation, meaning loss in real wages.

Last month, Tüpra? reportedly punished two Alia?a workers with a week of unpaid leave after they exercised their “right not to work” by refusing to be subcontracted.

The growing attacks on Tüpra? workers come as the company makes huge profits. In the first quarter of 2022, Tüpra? had net sales of 76.5 billion Turkish lira (\$4.66 billion), increasing its sales by 286 percent over the same period last year. In the first quarter, it posted net profits of nearly 896 million TL (\$54.63 million).

The corporate and financial oligarchy has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by a draconian increase in exploitation of the workers. In Turkey, wage labor received 31.4 percent of national income in 2019, but this fell to 27 percent in 2021. Business’ share of national income, on the other hand, rose from 42.9 percent to 47 percent over that period.

In its “Strategic Transformation Plan” last November, Tüpra? called to focus on “Sustainable Refining, Bio-fuels, Zero Carbon Electricity and Green Hydrogen.” Accordingly, it committed to reducing carbon emissions from its operations by 27 percent by 2030 compared to 2017 and to be carbon neutral by 2050. Tüpra? intends for workers to pay for this plan with layoffs, stepped-up exploitation, and wage and benefit cuts.

The surge in the cost of living from the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and NATO sanctions against Russia is driving workers into struggle in Turkey and internationally. While official annual inflation is at 70 percent, the Turkish Statistical Institute found that prices rose 105 percent in transportation and 89 percent in food and non-alcoholic beverages. The Inflation Research Group, made up of independent economists and academics, calculated that real inflation actually reached 156 percent.

The Turkish lira has collapsed. While it took 8.40TL to buy US\$1 in May 2021, today it takes 16.40 TL. In contrast, the minimum wage for around 10 million workers rose only 50 percent to 4,250 TL (\$260). Yet according to the pro-government Türk-?? union federation, of which Petrol-?? is a part, the poverty line for a family of four reached nearly 20,000 TL as of May.

As the rising cost of living and growing social inequality fuel the class struggle, various leaders of the capitalist class are calling on the government to approve a small increase in the minimum wage in order to prevent a

mass social explosion.

A month ago, Orhan Turan, president of the influential Turkish Industry and Business Association (TÜS?AD), said: “We need to think about this [wage increase] for labor peace, and if possible, to pass this process without crushing [workers] with inflation.”

Last week, Ender Yorganc?lar, Chairman of the Aegean Region Chamber of Industry, warned: “8 million people live on minimum wage. The purchasing power of minimum wage earners must not fall. People must live. People should be comfortable with the money they earn. Otherwise, hungry people will do anything.”

The struggle of the Tüpra? workers is part of a growing, international movement in the working class. Most recently, Turkish doctors went on strike for 6 days in May demanding wages and benefits, while health care workers organized a “White Rally” in Ankara on Sunday. January and February witnessed an unprecedented wave of strikes in Turkey, with at least 106 wildcat strikes.

Defeating union sabotage of workers struggles requires uniting workers across workplaces, industries and countries against the onslaught of corporations and governments. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) provides the organizing vehicle needed by the developing objective movement of the working class. We call on the Tüpra? workers and other workers entering into struggle to contact us and form such a committee.



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