

# Wildcat strike at TPI Turkey against low pay raise defies company, union

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Amid mass protests and strikes against the rising cost of living and unbearable living conditions in Sri Lanka and elsewhere around the world, workers at TPI Composites in Turkey launched a wildcat strike, independent of the union, against low wage increases and poor working conditions on July 6.

TPI workers announced on Twitter on Tuesday that the company had declared an unlawful lockout with the statement: “As of the 16:00 shift on 19.07.2022, our factory operations have been suspended indefinitely.” Rejecting the “go home” call of Petrol-İş union affiliated with the Türk-İş confederation, which supported the company’s proposal, workers announced that “we will not leave our workplace.”

On July 6, TPI workers began a work stoppage after the company offered them a 5 percent raise on top of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government’s 30 percent increase in the minimum wage from July. The workers left their morning shift an hour early and waited in the factory yard, and were joined by other workers who did not start work for the evening shift. 1,500 workers from the factory in Menemen and 1,000 workers from the factory in Çiğli-Sasalı have participated in the wildcat action.

TPI Composites, a US-based company, employs thousands of workers in China, Mexico, Denmark, Turkey and India. The company is one of the world’s leading wind-blade manufacturers. It has two factories in the western city of Izmir, Turkey. According to the company’s statement, it employs 5,000 workers in Turkey.

Management threatened to sue the workers who did not return to work, and the next day, 60 workers received a phone message informing them of their dismissal. The dismissal offensive continued afterwards, and the number of sacked workers reached

around 150.

After the Eid al-Adha, the wildcat strike resumed on July 17. While management increased the additional raise offer to 9 percent, workers rejected it as well due, demanding a 45 percent raise.

Inflation—triggered by the massive printing of money by central banks around the world after the COVID-19 pandemic, further enriching the super-rich and exacerbated by the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine—has pushed the cost of living in Turkey to unprecedented levels.

According to official Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat), the annual inflation rate rose to 78 percent in July, while the real annual inflation rate was 175 percent, according to an independent research organization, the Inflation Research Group (ENAG). In these circumstances, the Erdoğan government was forced to raise the minimum wage again in July, after having raised it once a year since 2016.

The minimum wage of 4,250 TL was raised by 30 percent to 5,500 TL (now \$310). However, according to the pro-government Türk-İş, the monthly food expenditure of a family of four (the “hunger limit”) reached 6,300 liras (\$360) in June, while the poverty line reached 20,800 liras (\$1,180). According to a survey conducted in March, 90 percent of the population lives below the poverty line.

The TPI workers’ wildcat strike is part of a growing movement of workers in Turkey and around the world who face similar conditions and the same class enemy. Turkey has seen more than 100 wildcat strikes in the first two months of 2022, while recent months have witnessed numerous national strikes by health workers. Around 500 workers at the Kangal Thermal Power Plant in Sivas are also on wildcat strike against the misery contract imposed in collaboration with the

union.

Speaking to the daily *Evrensel*, TPI workers emphasized that they work in harsh conditions with very low wages. A female worker said, “Our benefits were gradually taken away from us. Although our salaries were low, they were still above the market. But the recent inflation and high cost of living have rapidly eroded our wages. The salary we receive is between 5,500-7,000 liras [\$310-\$400]. Our biggest problem is wages.”

Another TPI worker explained that workers breathe carcinogenic substances and described the health problems they face: “Asthma and COPD are the most common illnesses that our colleagues face. Herniated discs and dislocated shoulders due to heavy working conditions have become common problems for many of our colleagues.”

Workers are forced to work without high-quality personal protective equipment. This also has left them vulnerable to COVID-19 from the beginning. In 2020, TPI, in cooperation with the Petrol-?? union, continued to herd workers into the factory, setting a record with net sales of around \$1.7 billion and production of more than 10,600 wind blades.

Another TPI worker exposes the conditions imposed on them in the factory by the company and the union, stating: “Shift supervisors use mobbing. Every operation we do inside is against the occupational safety rule. But in the factory, work comes first and then safety. We use and breathe in all kinds of chemicals you can think of such as spray, glass fiber, etc.. When there is an inspection, chemical dusty environments are cleaned. It is as if we have always worked in such an environment. But the reality is that we work in that chemical filth.”

The TPI Composite workers’ wildcat strike was isolated and suppressed from the very beginning by the Petrol-?? Union, which was strongly opposed to such a militant struggle. Neither the other members of Petrol-?? nor the members of the largest confederation, Türk-??, were mobilized for solidarity. On the contrary, the union tried to end the strike with a holiday break. It repeatedly sought to get the workers to accept the same offer from the company.

In the union’s vote on Monday to end the strike, 1,519 workers voted no and 978 voted yes in two plants. Thus, workers overwhelmingly (61 percent)

rejected the union-backed proposal to end the strike.

TPI workers must organize independently against the union's collaboration with the company and the sellout agreement. Otherwise Petrol-Is will repeat last year’s betrayal. In 2021, the union signed a sellout agreement in a hurry, without implementing the strike decision, and kept it secret from the workers. Workers learned about the contract from their shift supervisors, while those who opposed the union were reported to management and fired. Lessons need to be drawn from this fight.

The way forward for TPI workers and other workers entering the struggle is to take matters into their own hands, form independent rank-and-file committees and join the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to call on the support of their class brothers and sisters in Turkey and around the world. Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman’s campaign for the presidency of the United Auto Workers (UAW) in the US is a critical initiative to develop this rank-and-file rebellion against the pro-corporate union apparatus. This rebellion needs to be developed in all factories everywhere.



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