Class struggles mount in Turkey after earthquake disaster

Hasan Y?ld?r?m
27 February 2023

The total confirmed loss of life in the February 6 earthquakes that shook Turkey and Syria exceeded 51,000 yesterday, as a magnitude 5.6 aftershock rocked Malatya. At least one person died and more than 100 were injured. Experts say aftershocks in the region could continue for a year.

With countless buildings and workplaces damaged and workers lacking housing and other basic needs, the capitalist class is forcing workers in the quake zone to work, demanding that production continues unabated. In response, workers are resisting this onslaught with wildcat strikes. Even before the quake, millions of workers were struggling against the extraordinary cost of living, as official inflation exceeded 80 percent.

Around 600 workers at the construction site of the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant in Mersin walked off the job last week, demanding a wage increase. Workers at the Russian-built site, which will be Turkey's first nuclear power plant, stopped working on Wednesday after their demand for a 30 percent wage increase was rejected.

Intens Construction, another company operating at the same construction site, responded to workers' demand for a wage increase by firing those who had gone to the earthquake zone to help.

Workers who went to the earthquake zone in solidarity and to participate in search and rescue operations said that when they returned, their entry cards were not issued. No executive gave them an explanation. "We asked for equipment for the earthquake and were not given it, and now they are firing us for going to help," a worker told *Sol Haber*.

"They went to the earthquake zone with the call of the main company. They have arrived at the earthquake zone before the state, but they are fired. Is this right?" he said to the daily *Evrensel*.

Workers in the affected area are increasingly driven into struggle. An Iskur ?plik thread worker in the Dulkadiro?lu district of Kahramanmara? told *Evrensel*: "There was a fire in the factory because of collapsed floors [due to the quakes]. Other factories in the neighborhood also collapsed, but there were no casualties."

The worker added that they are forced to work in unsafe factory buildings: "The whole place is shaking. What will happen if a concrete block falls on me in a new earthquake? If I lose an arm or a leg, management will say 'it's not my problem.' Who will give me my rights?"

Shortly afterwards, a worker forced to work in a badly-damaged metal factory in the same district was killed and four others injured in a collapse. The company boss reportedly had forced workers to take the remaining products out of the factory.

A 23-year-old worker at the Halilo?lu weaving factory in Gaziantep, an industrial city in the earthquake zone, told the *Gerçek Gündem* that after the 6.4 magnitude earthquake in Hatay on February 20, the supervisor told them, "Get used to these earthquakes, get back to your machines."

A worker from the ?ireci textile factory in Gaziantep said the columns of the factory where he worked cracked after the earthquakes, but they were covered with plaster and workers were called in to work. The factory had sent a message promising 2,000 lira in aid to persuade workers who did not want to come to work.

Another worker at ?ireci said, "Our factory exports to Russia. Trucks are waiting at the gate. The management has the ambition to keep the business going… The bosses are fine with it… It's like in the military when they put the infantry in front, 'let's win this war, at any cost.'"

© World Socialist Web Site

In Malatya, the majority of Mil-May textile workers did not go to work despite threats from management. On February 16, the company sent a message to the workers threatening them with dismissal without compensation if they did not continue working. Workers in textile factories in Ad?yaman also said that their employers had called them to ask if they would return to work.

In many places, workers launched wildcat strikes, refusing to work in buildings damaged in the quake and facing dangerous new aftershocks. Workers at ?ireci textile, Kaplanser carpet and Gür thread factories were among them.

Amid this growing backlash from workers, President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an issued a decree banning layoffs and introducing short-time working allowances for the affected area. Although the decree purportedly bans "layoffs" in the region, companies can dismiss workers by paying a fine of only one gross minimum wage.

For those who do not benefit from short-time working or unemployment allowance and remain unemployed, the Unemployment Insurance Fund will pay a very inadequate sum of 133 Turkish liras (TL) per day or around 4,000 TL (US$210) per month, during the state of emergency. The workers will be covered by General Health Insurance. However, the poverty line for a family of four already exceeds 30,000 TL (US$1,590).

This decree actually strengthens the hand of corporations. A similar decree was issued after the COVID-19 pandemic began. The "ban on dismissal" does not provide job security. It allows employers to dismiss workers for reasons such as "failure to comply with the rules of morality and goodwill" and "closure of the workplace" in the Labor Code.

Moreover, workers can be dismissed on trumped-up grounds, without notice or severance pay. Those who find a new job because the short-time working allowance is insufficient and want to start a new life outside the affected area cannot benefit from severance pay.

The capitalist class and the political establishment do not want to allow the earthquake disaster, which has caused massive destruction and loss of life, to stop the wheels of production and thus cause a prolonged disruption in the extraction of profit from workers. Companies are more worried about the loss of labor power than the social destruction faced by masses of workers. It is estimated that 3 or 4 million people have migrated from the 11 provinces in the affected region.

Hikmet Çinçin, the chair of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Antakya, one of the cities hardest hit by the quakes, told Ekonomim.com: "Businesses need to maintain their minimum human resources to survive. I think the healthy male population should not leave the city."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site