

Mounting strike movement in Turkey against rising cost of living

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On Monday, 625 subway and tram workers at Metro A, owned by the Izmir Metropolitan Municipality, went on strike, powerfully demonstrating the social force of the working class. Subway transportation, used by around 400,000 people every day in Izmir, Turkey's third largest city, with a population of over 4 million, ground to a halt.

The impact of the strike, which began at the workers' insistence, led the trade union apparatus to move to suppress it by signing a sell-out contract after two days.

Contract negotiations between the Social Democratic Public Employers' Union (Sodem-Sen)—representing municipalities run by the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), and the pro-government Türk-İş confederation-affiliated Demiryol-İş union—ended in a dispute over wages, working hours, job security and wages for new recruits. The negotiations lasted for almost seven months.

On Tuesday, around 18,000 workers at the ZELMAN and ZENERJ companies covering health, education and other sectors, also owned by the Izmir Metropolitan Municipality, walked out for one day over unpaid wages related to the contract signed in April.

The strikes and work stoppages in Izmir come amid an upsurge of the class struggle under conditions of the rising cost of living and a series of social attacks by the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to close the budget deficit and continue to enrich the corporate and financial elites.

Thousands of physicians, nurses and other healthcare workers affiliated to the Health and Social Services Unity and Struggle Platform (SABİM), which brings together many trade unions and professional organizations, went on a two-day strike August 1 and 2. Since the beginning of 2022, health care workers in Turkey have been on strike across the country,

demanding higher wages and better working conditions.

Last month, around 3,000 Dicle Electricity (DEDA) distribution workers in the largely Kurdish cities of Diyarbakır, Urfa, Mardin, Batman, Siirt and Şırnak mounted wildcat strikes to demand wage increases and improvements in working conditions. The company responded by laying off around 100 workers.

The strike by workers at the Corning plant in the industrial center of Gebze, Kocaeli, is now in its third week. A strike action notice was issued on July 17 at the Eti Maden Bandırma factory after contract negotiations failed. If the union does not force a sell-out at the eleventh hour, workers will go on strike on August 17.

The contracts of about 150,000 auto and metal workers in Turkey expire in September. Auto and metal workers, whose wages have fallen to the level of the minimum wage in recent years with the collaboration of the unions, want to get rid of the yoke of the union apparatus and fight back.

The movement in Turkey is part of a developing wave of strikes in North America, Europe and around the world. In the US, tens of thousands of screenwriters and actors as well as 1,400 locomotive builders at Wabtec are on strike. In recent weeks there have been strikes by 1,400 National Steel Car workers and 7,400 dockworkers in Canada, 10,000 airport ground service workers across Italy and 20,000 rail workers in Britain. The contracts of some 170,000 auto workers in the US and Canada expire in mid-September.

Workers are experiencing a serious decline in living standards. Last year, Turkish annual inflation was officially around 80 percent, while real inflation was over 150 percent. As of June this year, it was officially 38 percent, but according to the independent ENAG, it

was almost 110 percent.

At the same time, the Erdoğan government has launched a series of major social attacks. The central bank has raised interest rates, which will increase unemployment with the aim of suppressing workers' wage demands. Massive additional taxes were imposed last month mostly on working people. The price of one liter fuel oil rose from 26 Turkish liras (US\$1) at the beginning of July to 36 TL (US\$1.35) at the end of the month, an increase of almost 40 percent in one month, mostly due to taxes.

The pro-government Türk-İş union confederation announced that the poverty line of a family of four at the end of June became 37,974 TL (US\$1,400) and the hunger line (monthly food expenditure for a family of four) was 11,658 TL (US\$430).

A large part of the workforce is employed at the official minimum wage of 11,402 liras (US\$420) or slightly above. This is also true for the subway and tramway workers in Izmir.

Speaking to the daily *Evrensel*, a striking worker said, "I received 9,200 liras last month. My apartment rent is 5,000 liras. In addition to this, electricity, water, other expenses, how are we going to make a living?... We don't want to get poorer day by day."

The reaction of the municipal administration from the beginning of the strike has shown once again that the CHP is no different from the Erdoğan government in terms of strikebreaking and hostility towards workers.

While President Erdoğan has banned countless strikes over the past two decades on the grounds of "national security" concerns, which means the interests of the corporations, the CHP-led municipalities have responded to workers striking by scabbing and inciting the city population against the strikers.

In his statement at the beginning of the strike, Izmir Mayor Tunç Soyer declared that because of the necessary "investments" to be made it was unacceptable for the workers to demand wages close to the poverty line. By "investments," he meant the funds being transferred by the municipalities to the companies. According to the capitalist parties, the wages of the workers who ensure the maintenance of life in the cities are an unnecessary expense.

The city administration tried to break the strike by cancelling the holidays of other city transport workers and mobilizing buses on the tram line. Lying

propaganda was spread that tram workers were harassing the city's population by demanding unacceptable wages.

The subway and tram strike in Izmir was a major indictment of the pseudo-left organizations. A significant layer of these forces backed Soyer in the 2019 local elections and lined up behind CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in the presidential elections last May.

The strike confirms the reactionary role of the union bureaucracy. In his statement following the strike, Soyer announced that union officials accepted the municipality's wage offer exactly as it was, with only a 7 percent increase in benefits.

Workers did not go on strike for this. According to the daily *Evrensel*, workers reacted to the sell-out imposed without a vote by shouting "They sold us out!" The bureaucracy of the Demiryol-İş Union, which cancelled the strike decision taken in 2021 at the eleventh hour, could not take the same step before the strike this year in the face of the growing determination of the workers to take action. But in the absence of workers' control through their own rank-and-file committees over the collective bargaining process, carried out behind closed doors, the apparatus was able to impose another sell-out.

This underlines the need to build independent rank-and-file committees to take forward the growing strike movement in Turkey and around the world. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) provides the means to unite workers across workplaces, sectors and countries against the collusion of the governments, companies and trade union apparatus.



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