

Contract fight begins for 150,000 metal, auto workers in Turkey

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The collective agreements of more than 150,000 workers in the metal and automotive industry, one of the most important sectors of the Turkish economy, have expired. Contract negotiations for the period of September 2023–2025 will start on September 26.

The talks, which are expected to last two months, will take place as big companies are making huge profits but workers' living standards fall in the face of rising living costs, and their anger is on the verge of exploding. The metalworkers, whose wages have been reduced to the level of the minimum wage in the last years with the cooperation of the trade unions, want to fight to free themselves from the yoke of the trade union apparatus.

In recent months, the growing anger of different sections of workers at the cost of living and unbearable living conditions erupted in a new wave of wildcat strikes. Turkish metal and autoworkers are part of an international movement of the working class. In addition to the Turkish workers, the contracts of 150,000 autoworkers and metalworkers in the US, 20,000 in Canada and 30,000 autoworkers in South Korea are due to expire this month. Workers face the same transnational corporations and the need for an international strategy.

Contract negotiations involve global companies and Turkey's largest industrial enterprises: Fiat (Tofa?), Renault, Ford, Mercedes and Man in automotive, and Arçelik, Bosch and Siemens in white goods and electronics. While the Turkish Employers' Association of Metal Industries (MESS) represents the companies, three unions (Türk Metal, Birle?ik Metal-?? and Özçelik-??) sit at the negotiating table.

Türk Metal, a member of the Türk-?? confederation, demands an 80 percent raise in hourly wages for the first six months of the year. Özçelik-??, affiliated to

Hak-?? confederation, has prepared a similar draft. Birle?ik Metal-??, affiliated to D?SK confederation, demands a 140.5 percent raise. The unions demand a raise equal to the inflation rate plus 5 or 8 percent for the other six months.

These rates, which the unions declare as their starting point in bargaining, partly reflect the growing anger of workers. However, they fall far short of the real wage losses that workers have suffered in recent years. Workers know that these rates will already be reduced with the approval of the unions during the negotiations, and that if the government bans a possible strike, the official arbitration board will condemn them again to poverty wages.

A Man Truck & Bus worker told the newspaper *Evrensel*: "It was supposed to be the contract of the century. They have pulled a fast one on workers. We will not accept this draft. You are making a mockery of the workers. How can you sit at the table with 80 percent? Shame on this union!"

Another Man worker called on the management of Turkish Metal to resign: "The union leadership should resign. Are we going to ask for alms in two years? Shame on the dues we pay."

The annual official inflation rate as calculated by the official Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), rose to 59 percent as of August 2023. The government's year-end inflation forecast is 65 percent. However, real annual inflation in August was 128 percent, according to a study by the independent Inflation Research Group.

According to the Türk-?? survey, the poverty line of a family of four was 39,733 liras (US\$1,471) at the end of August. Even if the unions' proposals are accepted, workers' wages will only increase to half or slightly more than half of the poverty line.

According to a statement by Birle?ik Metal-??, the

average wage of a unionised metal worker in MESS member companies was 91 percent above the minimum wage in August 2010, but now it is only 13 percent above the minimum wage. This huge decline in real wages has been imposed by the cooperation of the trade union apparatus with the companies.

The tiers wage system, i.e., the policy of low wages at the beginning of employment, is also imposed by the unions themselves. Birleşik Metal-İş proposes that “the starting wage should be 10 percent higher than the minimum wage.” According to this, the hourly wage of a worker hired immediately after the signing of the collective agreement will not even be half the wage of a worker hired before the signing of the agreement.

While workers’ losses are increasing, automotive companies are making huge profits. According to data for the first six months of 2023, Tofaş (Fiat) increased its profits by 145 percent and Ford by 85 percent.

Both companies and union officials are well aware that workers are determined to go on strike in the event of a dispute. They know that such a strike could spark an explosion in the class struggle; against this, they rely on the government’s threats of a strike ban.

The government also fears that a possible strike in the metal industry, which is the backbone of Turkey’s economy, coupled with rising social opposition, will have an explosive effect. Already, the Turkish economy is in a deepening crisis, and workers’ living conditions are in deep decline.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) has issued at least 20 strike postponement decrees since coming to power in 2002. Strikes by 200,000 workers have been postponed—that is, effectively banned. These include strike actions in the metal industry in 2018.

In January 2022, the government and MESS relied on the unions to keep anger in the factories under control. The unions signed, without the workers’ consent, a series of sellout contracts that were far below the real rate of inflation.

In response, over 800 workers at the Çimsataş factory in Mersin reacted by stopping production and occupying the factory. This wildcat strike was brought to an end with the cooperation of the company and the Birleşik Metal-İş union. However, the following weeks and months witnessed the biggest wave of wildcat strikes in Turkey in recent years.

Metalworkers’ anger against the unions erupted in wildcat strikes of more than 20,000 workers in 2015, mainly at Renault, Tofaş (Fiat) and Ford. They rebelled against Türk Metal, the largest union in the sector, forming their own action committees. A new sellout contract could pave the way for a similar explosion.

Metalworkers need to take action independently of the unions to prevent a new sellout contract and to improve declining living conditions. In every factory and workplace, workers must elect their own representatives and build rank-and-file committees. These committees will provide workers with real information, unite all metalworkers and form the basis for the development of an international struggle against the metal-automotive corporations and the capitalist governments behind them.



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