

Hundreds of textile workers in Turkey continue wildcat strike in defiance of military police crackdown

Barış Demir, Hasan Yıldırım
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Striking Özak Tekstil workers in the southeastern city of Şanlıurfa, who are fighting for better wages and benefits after resigning from the pro-corporate trade union, face severe state repression.

Workers at Özak Tekstil were members of Öz Şişkeci union, which is affiliated to the pro-corporate and pro-government Hak-Şişkeci confederation, for six years. They have faced many problems: a cost-of-living crisis, arbitrary dismissals, wage cuts, poor quality food, verbal harassment and abuse of workers, alongside increased workload and forced overtime after the devastating earthquake in the region on February 6.

But as is the case around the world, the union apparatus worked hand in hand with management to suppress the demands of rank-and-file workers.

When about 500 out of 700 Özak Tekstil workers left Öz Şişkeci and became members of the independent Birtek-Sen union, their struggle entered a new stage. The management fired one of the leading workers, and the majority of the workforce responded by stopping production on November 27, demanding the reinstatement of their co-worker. They faced retaliatory threats from management to dismiss them without compensation and to make them pay for the “damage caused to the company” and a state crackdown.

On Monday, the fifteenth day of their struggle, military police attacked them with water cannons, pepper spray and batons. At least 100 workers and four officials of Birtek-Sen were arrested after gendarmerie attacked them in front of the factory and in the town square. It was the fourth violent crackdown on the striking workers.

While most of those detained were released the same day, trade union officials and four workers remained in

custody. On Wednesday, the military police again attacked the workers trying to reach the factory and some 20 workers were reportedly detained.

The *World Socialist Web Site* declares its solidarity with the Özak Tekstil workers and strongly condemns the state crackdown against the workers and independent trade union officials.

About 300 textile workers held a meeting on Monday evening and decided to continue their strike. After they gathered again on Tuesday, management agreed to meet with their representative. But when negotiations failed to produce any results, workers decided to continue the struggle.

The management has sought to keep production going by using scabs and by forcibly keeping other workers inside who wanted to leave. At the end of November, the Şanlıurfa Governorate issued a city-wide ban on demonstrations and protests until December 2 in a bid to suppress the strike and force strikers to return to work. Faced with workers’ continued determination to fight, despite the brutal crackdown, attacks by military police escalated, and both workers and Birtek-Sen officials were repeatedly arrested.

The ruling elite fear that the militant fight by the Özak Tekstil workers could spread throughout the region and beyond.

Provinces in the south and southeast of Turkey such as Şanlıurfa, Gaziantep, Adana and Diyarbakır have become industrial centers in recent decades, led by the textile industry. It is critical for the ruling class to suppress class struggles that would lead to partial gains in workers’ wages and benefits, to prevent them from setting a precedent.

In a similar struggle in August, workers at the Koza Hal?, ?ireci Koton and ?ireci Akrilik factories in Gaziantep rejected wage increases below the real inflation rate, and some 2,000 textile workers went on wildcat strike. In July, 3,000 workers at the Dicle Electricity Distribution Company (DEDA?) in ?anl?urfa, Diyarbak?r, Mardin, Batman, Siirt and ??nak went on wildcat strike demanding wage increases and better working conditions.

In Turkey, as around the world, the cost-of-living crisis, triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic in recent years and exacerbated by NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine, has devastated workers' living standards. President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an government's interest rate hikes and tight monetary policy following the May elections are aimed at increasing unemployment and suppressing demands for wage increases.

Moreover, the Erdo?an government's hypocritical response to Israel's genocide in Gaza and Turkey's ongoing critical trade with Israel has also fueled the anger of the masses.

In all these processes, the trade union bureaucracy has collaborated with the government and the corporations. That is why the workers' struggles for wages and working conditions have erupted everywhere in recent years in the form of wildcat strikes and rebellions against the pro-capitalist trade union apparatus. The struggle of ?zak Tekstil is part of this worldwide trend.

One of the most important indications of this was the response of autoworkers to the campaign of Will Lehman, a socialist worker running for president of the United Auto Workers (UAW) in the US in 2022. Against all pressures by the apparatus, Lehman won 5,000 votes from autoworkers for his international socialist programme, based on dismantling the union apparatus and giving power to the rank-and-file. Lehman's recent call for the UAW to stop producing equipment for the Israeli army was widely supported on social media.

The way forward for workers is to organize through rank-and-file committees independent of the trade union apparatus and to unite their struggles on an international scale. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, uniting workers in struggle from the Americas to Europe, Asia and Australia, provides workers with the organizational tool necessary for their international struggle against

capitalism.



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