

160,000 metal and auto workers in Turkey to strike

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The 2023-2025 contract negotiations between corporations and trade unions, covering over 160,000 workers in the metal and auto industry, one of the most important sectors of the Turkish economy, failed to reach an agreement. Two unions had to take a strike decision demanded by the rank-and-file workers. The announced divided strikes will begin on Friday.

The negotiations, ongoing for the past four months, have taken place as the metal and auto corporations continue to make huge profits. At the same time workers' living standards are falling in the face of rising costs, and anger is on the verge of exploding.

This growing opposition of workers, whose wages have been reduced to the level of the minimum wage in the past years due to a reactionary collaboration between the government, corporations and the unions, forced the union apparatus to call a strike.

Contract negotiations involve global companies and Turkey's largest industrial enterprises: Fiat (Tofaş), 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 from Türk-İş, Birleşik Metal-İş from DİSK and Özçelik-İş from Hak-İş confederations) sit at the negotiating table.

MESS made an initial offer of a 35 percent wage increase. After no agreement was reached, the mediation process began in November. In this phase MESS increased its offer to 50 percent and then to 60 percent. These rates were below even the official annual inflation rate, which reached 65 percent in 2023. The independent Inflation Research Group (ENAG) calculated that prices rose 127.2 percent in the past 12 months.

Following the decision of Türk Metal and Birleşik

Metal-İş to go on strike last week, MESS officials have made a new offer that amounts to a total increase of 73 percent in the average wage. Türk Metal demanded a total increase of 119 percent, while Birleşik Metal-İş was demanding 140.5 percent.

The unions fear that if the MESS proposal is accepted in its current form, they will not be able to control workers' independent mass initiatives. In January 2022, hundreds of metalworkers at Çimsataş factory in the southern city of Mersin launched a wildcat strike, defying a sellout agreement. That was the beginning of a wave of wildcat strikes across the country.

Türk Metal, of which the majority of the workers are members, has announced strike action without giving an exact date, except for the Tofaş plant in Bursa, aiming to placate workers and to reach an agreement against their will. With around 6,000 workers, the Tofaş factory was one of the epicentres of the wave of metal strikes defying the collaboration between the unions and corporations in 2015.

Speaking to the daily *Evrensel*, a Ford Otosan auto worker said, "The first thing we thought was that the contract will be signed next week because every contract period they play such a trick. They make a fake strike decision and then suddenly one night the contract is signed." He added, "But this year might not be the same. That is in the hands of us, i.e., workers. The second thing we all said when we got the news was 'We have to do something now.'"

A worker at the white goods manufacturer B/S/H expressed his anger at the union as follows: "MESS is being encouraged by Türk Metal. Will MESS take these fake actions seriously? Decisions on actions that will affect production must be made as soon as possible. A decision to strike has been made, but the date is not clear. MESS hopes that the strike will be

postponed. Why should they meet our demands under these conditions? Actions that will affect production must be taken immediately and a strike date must be set.”

The Birle?ik Metal-?? union announced that the first strike will start on January 19 and will be extended on January 23 and 24. It said that only 7,000 of its 12,000 members would participate in the first strikes. The announcement of “gradual strikes” echoes the “stand-up strikes” called by the American United Auto Workers union which strangled the mass struggle against the big auto companies voted for by workers.

Workers must understand that they are fighting not only against corporations and pro-corporate unions, but also against the government and the entire capitalist system. Both MESS and the unions rely on the government’s threats of a strike ban.

President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an’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—effectively banned. These include strike actions in the metal industry in 2018.

Metal and auto workers must now prepare to organize a strike against the unions’ last-minute sellout and government bans and form their own rank-and-file committees independent of the unions. Such a struggle should not be limited to the workplace, but must be linked to other workplaces and sectors, and to rising class struggles around the world. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) provides the basis for uniting workers across all workplaces, sectors and countries.

Recently, growing protests against the cost of living in Turkey have been joined by the struggles of public sector workers. They have begun mass protests, stating that the official inflation rate for 2023 does not reflect the reality and that their wages should be increased.

On January 8, the Harb-?? Union, which is organized in the defence industry, launched symbolic protest marches from many provinces to Ankara. Thousands of workers at the Air Maintenance Factory Directorate in Eski?ehir also staged a protest and demanded better living conditions, whistling and clapping as they left the workplace. The union announced several protests in the coming days, which do not include strike actions.

Workers at the Turkish Rail Vehicle Industry Inc.

(Türasa?) factories in many provinces have also raised their demands for additional wage increases through several protests. On January 9, workers in the Sakarya and Sivas factories staged noisy protests, while the workers in Eski?ehir marched from the factory to the city center.

The hundreds of workers in Eski?ehir protested the pro-company union apparatus, demanding effective actions like strikes. During the march, they called for the resignation of Ergün Atalay, chairman of both Demiryol-??, the union of which they are members, and Türk-??, the largest trade union confederation in the country.

The growing struggles of workers in Turkey are part of a developing movement globally. As emphasized in the *World Socialist Web Site*’s New Year statement, over the past year various sections of the working class all over the world have expressed themselves in strikes and actions against the cost of living and unbearable living conditions, including the 145,000 Big Three auto workers’ fight in the US.

Metal and auto workers must reject the pro-corporate unions and the sellout contracts they will seek to impose, organizing their independent strike committees and taking matters into their own hands. These committees will provide workers with real information, unite all workers, and form the basis for the development of a genuine class struggle against the reactionary alliance between the corporations, the union apparatus and the government.



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