

Rising inequality provokes strike wave in Turkey

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The Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat) published the results of the Income and Living Conditions Survey conducted in 2023 with reference to income data for 2022. It shows that over the past decade, the richest have increased their share of income at the expense of the rest of society.

Worsening social inequality, deepened by high inflation and the cost of living, is also a basis for the growth of working class struggles. Strikes and protests have taken on an explosive character in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and Israel's genocidal assault in Gaza.

According to the TurkStat report, the income share of the richest 20 percent of society increased from 45.9 percent in 2013 to 49.8 percent in 2022. For the lowest income 20 percent, it decreased from 6.2 to 5.9 percent. The other three income segments also experienced a decline over the 10-year period.

According to the report, the income ratio of the richest 20 percent to the bottom 20 percent has increased from 7.4 to 8.4. When calculated in 10 percentiles, income inequality between the richest 10 percent and the bottom 10 percent has increased from 12.6 to 15 times. The Gini Coefficient, an international measure, has risen from 0.391 to 0.433.

Even the official figures, manipulated by TurkStat and considered unreliable by most people, cannot hide the increase in inequality. There are many reasons to believe that real inequality is much higher. Moreover, the study does not include the year 2023, when capital incomes were further boosted by high interest rates and speculation, and the majority of society was crushed by the rising cost of living.

Although TurkStat has announced an inflation rate of 64 percent for 2023, there is a widespread view among

the public and various experts that these figures are incomplete and distorted. The Inflation Research Group (ENAG), an independent organization, put the inflation rate for 2023 at 127 percent.

The rising cost of living has triggered a rise in working class struggles in recent years. In response, the government has put pressure on employment and wages through high interest rates. The central bank's key interest rate rose from 8.5 percent last May to 45 percent in January after eight consecutive increases. However, the trade unions play the biggest role in suppressing wages and class struggle.

In recent months, during collective bargaining, workers' determination to fight has forced the unions to call strikes. But the unions have ended the strikes with last-minute sell-out agreements that fall short of real inflation.

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 rank-and-file workers. One day before the announced strike date, both unions signed the sales contracts, confirming WSWs's warnings.

Although the 98 percent increase in the contract seems high, it is below the real rate of inflation and the unions' demands in the draft. Moreover, most of the wages in the metal sector were 40 percent below the poverty line set by the unions themselves. With the latest increase, the average wage in the metal industry was 30,000 TL (US\$985). According to a survey by Türk-??, the poverty line in January was 49,019 TL (US\$1,610).

The continuation of the graduated wage system has resulted in workers with less seniority benefiting

relatively less from wage increases. A metal worker criticized the results of the graduated wage system on X in response to the “Resistance Won” post of the Birle?ik Metal-?? union: “If we had gone on strike, would we have gotten a smaller raise? I am a 2-year employee and my raise is 85%. A 10-year worker gets a 107% increase... Because his salary is higher, he gains on again.” Türk Metal closed the posts on its X account where it announced the signing of the contract to comments.

After the signing of the contract, the workers of Sarkusyan Metal shouted slogans in the lunch hall to show their hostility to the agreement and insisted on voting to continue or not the strike.

The determination of the workers to fight continues, either by forcing the unions to strike in the collective bargaining process or by wildcat strikes. Workers at the Erciyas Steel Pipe Industry in Düzce and Mersin went on strike on Wednesday, while the workers of ?ahinkul Machinery in Bursa have been on strike since December 21.

Hundreds of Ulu? Enerji workers in Bursa, Çanakkale, Bal?kesir and Yalova continue their strike for a second week against the meltdown of their wages in the face of inflation.

Striking Özak Tekstil workers in the southeastern city of ?anl?urfa, who are fighting for better wages and benefits after resigning from the pro-corporate trade union, continue their protests. The workers, who have been staging work stoppages and protests since November 27 despite state repression, have continued to protest, most recently in front of the company's headquarters in Istanbul and the stores of several international textile brands for which the company produces.

Public sector workers continue to protest against the cost of living in Turkey. Insisting that the official inflation rate for 2023 does not reflect reality and that their wages should be increased, public sector workers are opposed not only to the government but also the union leaders.

Defense industry workers, who are members of the Harb-?? union, and workers at the Turkish Rail Vehicle Industry Inc. (Türasa?) factories in many provinces, who are members of the Demiryol-?? union, have been demonstrating for the past month to demand additional wage increases. After their protests did not lead to any

results, the workers demanded the resignation of the leaders of their union and of the Türk-?? Federation and asked them to declare all their incomes. Workers at a Türk ?eker factory in Eskisehir said, “Today, we are protesting against both Türk-?? and ?eker-?? unions. We are protesting against the unions that do not listen to the workers.”

The growing workers' protests in Turkey are part of a global movement. All over the world, different sections of the working class are expressing themselves through strikes and actions against the cost of living and unbearable living conditions. In Europe, transport workers, including train, bus and airline workers, have recently joined this wave of strikes.

Workers are increasingly realizing that their interests against the corporations cannot be advanced by the unions and the sell-out agreements they try to impose. Workers must now take matters into their own hands and build independent rank-and-file committees. 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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