Rank-and-file union leader arrested as wildcat strikes broaden in Turkey

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The government of President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an has taken measures to suppress the wave of wildcat strikes in more than 20 factories in the Ba?p?nar Organised Industrial Zone in Gaziantep against the imposition of low wage increases.

On February 13, the Gaziantep Governorate issued a 15-day ban on protests in the whole city and removed the resistance tents in front of workplaces. Mehmet Türkmen, the leader of the independent rank-and-file union, the United Textile, Weaving and Leather Workers' Union (B?RTEK-SEN), was detained—first on Friday, then on Sunday—and arrested on Monday.

In a statement on X, the Socialist Equality Group condemned Turkmen's arrest and the governorate's decision, demanded his release and called on workers and youth to defend the wildcat strike movement:

> The detention of B?RTEK-SEN President Mehmet Türkmen without any application for complaint and the governor's ban to suppress the wildcat strike movement of textile workers in Antep for better wages and working conditions show that constitutional rights are openly violated in order to protect the capitalist companies.
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> The main concern of the government and the entire ruling class is to prevent the fundamental antagonism in society, class divisions and thus the class struggle, from coming to the fore and preventing millions of workers from uniting and mobilizing for their social and democratic aspirations.
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> Mehmet Türkmen must be released immediately and the governorate's "ban on protests", which directly targets the workers, must be revoked. For this, the support of the working class and youth across the country and internationally must be mobilised.

"I am a trade union official and it is our duty to support the protests organised by workers in order to obtain their democratic and economic rights," Türkmen said in his declaration, adding that "No criminal offence was committed during these protests, this case has reached this stage only due to the complaint of some of the bosses." Following the verdict, B?RTEK-SEN called on workers to gather in the evening to protest the arrest.

When workers at the Ba?p?nar Organised Industrial Zone received their first salary of the new year in early February, they were expecting a pay rise to make up for their losses due to high inflation. In January, Turkey's official annual inflation rate was 42 percent, while ENAG, an independent research organisation, put the figure at 81 percent. In the first month of the year alone, official inflation was 5 percent.

But the companies have announced that they will raise wages by the same amount as the government's increase in the minimum wage, i.e. by 30 percent. This means an impoverishment of the workers. The actions of the workers who refused to accept the misery wage soon spread to many factories in Ba?p?nar and threatened to trigger a movement within the working class in Gaziantep and in the whole country.

The arbitrary arrest of Türkmen is aimed at criminalising all workers' struggles and expressions of support for these struggles.

The prosecutor's office detained Türkmen on charges of "incitement to commit a crime" and "violation of work and working life". The only real crime is the

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unconstitutional ban on demonstrations by the governorate, and the arrest of Türkmen in favour of the companies.

According to *Evrensel* newspaper, Türkmen was asked about the purpose of the following social media post: “It’s freezing. It’s 00:40. ?ireci [textile workers] are up! There are also those who resist in this weather. Those who warm up February and light up the night. The workers of ?ireci call out to the workers of the S?rma carpet factory owned by the [same] bosses: ‘S?rma [workers] out!’ Ba?p?nar, don’t sleep, protect your bread!”

In the midst of the cost-of-living crisis and explosive social tensions, the ruling class and the government fear that such local workers’ struggles outside the control of the trade union confederations could trigger mass class struggles across the country. In December, Erdo?an tried to ban the metalworkers’ strike on the grounds that it was “disruptive to national security”, but the workers refused to give in and continued their strike.

There are good reasons for the ruling class to be concerned about the explosion of anger building up in the working class. The policies pursued since Mehmet Simsek took over as the Minister of Finance and the Treasury are fundamentally based on suppressing real wages and making the working class pay the price for financing militarism and transferring wealth to the banks and corporations.

In this context, the government refused to raise the minimum wage last July. In early 2025, it raised the minimum wage below the rate of inflation. Given that about half of registered workers in Turkey earn the minimum wage and millions of unregistered workers earn much lower wages, the new minimum wage means further impoverishment of workers in real terms.

In contrast, according to the November budget implementation report of the Ministry of Treasury and Finance, the tax collected from companies in the period January-November this year increased by 13.5 percent compared to the same period last year, whereas the tax collected from workers increased by 119.8 percent. While the minimum wage will increase by only 30 percent, the budget allocated to the defence and security sector will increase by 80 percent.

Freezing or reducing workers’ real wages, social cuts, transferring wealth to big corporations through incentives and tax cuts, and wasting resources on militarism are the agenda of the ruling elites worldwide, especially the Trump administration in the US.

This violent capitalist offensive, which makes it impossible to contain class tensions through democratic forms of government, requires the abolition of democratic rights and the construction of authoritarian regimes. That is why the Erdo?an government is escalating its attacks on the political opposition and the press, suspending democratic rights and trying to prevent the development of an independent mass movement of the working class.

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