

# Turkish workers occupy mine against privatisation as wildcat strikes continue

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The attack of the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an and the municipalities on the wages and living conditions of the working class is provoking growing struggles in different sectors.

On Sunday, 40 miners and 10 plant workers started a sit-in 800 metres underground against the privatisation tender of Çay?rhan Thermal Power Plant in Ankara to be held Tuesday.

Previously, 800 workers had occupied the mine in November and 1,300 other workers had demonstrated in support. In mid-February the workers organised a protest march to the capital Ankara against the rescheduled privatisation tender.

The cost of living crisis in Turkey continues. While the official annual inflation rate in February was 39 percent, the independent research institute ENAG calculated it at 79 percent.

This inflation is not reflected in workers' real wages. At the beginning of the year, the government raised the minimum wage far below even the official inflation rate, condemning millions to misery. At the same time, the government continues to offer incentives and tax cuts to businesses. According to the newspaper *Evrensel*, 1 billion liras in incentives were distributed to energy companies in January.

The miners' struggle is accompanied by a growing wave of wildcat strikes in different sectors against the cost of living and the government's social offensive.

The work stoppage at the Ba?p?nar Organised Industrial Zone in Gaziantep, which began in February demanding higher wage increases, continues despite government pressure.

Last month, in the face of a wave of wildcat strikes by workers in more than 20 factories against the imposition of low wage increases, the Erdo?an government issued a 15-day protest ban across the

province, and the chairman of the independent grassroots union United Textile, Weaving and Leather Workers' Union (B?RTEK-SEN), Mehmet T?rkmen, was arrested.

As B?RTEK-SEN launched a petition for T?rkmen's release, Will Lehman, a former United Auto Workers presidential candidate and socialist autoworker at the Mack Trucks plant in the US, condemned the arrest and highlighted the global nature of the attack: "Everywhere, governments side with corporations to keep wages low and crush independent organizing."

Last Thursday, on the last day of the protest ban, the 5th Administrative Court of Gaziantep suspended the Governorate's order to ban all protests and events in the city. The court's decision officially recognised that the ban was illegal and arbitrary.

With the end of the ban, the workers have resumed their protests, but police repression continues. Workers at the Has Çuval factory gathered in front of the factory on Friday and were blocked by the police and threatened with intervention.

One worker fainted during the police action against the Grand Carpet workers who had stopped work. Another, who said that the police had beaten him, demanded, "I want my rights... I am not a terrorist, I am a worker."

Last week, 600 workers at Sunel Tobacco and 800 workers at Oriental Tobacco in Izmir walked off the job after rejecting a pay rise offered by the companies, while thousands in many municipalities are going on wildcat strike.

According to the collective agreement, the minimum salary of the workers of the Republican People's Party (CHP) Seyhan Municipality in Adana should be 55,000 Turkish liras (US\$1,509) per month but this year the workers received 35,000 liras (US\$960), the same

salary as last year.

In response, the workers staged a one-and-a-half-day wildcat strike from the morning of February 24 and a mass demonstration in front of the city hall on February 25.

One worker told the *Evrensel*, “New receivables [wages] will be added to our receivables [unpaid wages, bonuses and other compensation owed to workers]. Our money is disappearing. There are those among us who have foreclosures, there are those who cannot pay their rent. There are those who are owed 100,000-200,000 TL [US\$2,744-5,489] receivables. Everybody is waiting for the receivables to be paid. They always talk about [the municipality’s] debts, but they don’t talk about the municipality’s income”

Another worker said, “There is a shortage of staff. Instead of hiring new staff, they made us work alone and called us to work on our weekends. Our friends who go to work do not get their overtime pay. We are making sacrifices both by working in these conditions and by being underpaid. We do not want to sacrifice any more. The staff is missing, but they are talking about lay-offs.”

On the same day, while the CHP municipalities of Ceyhan and Kadirli were scabbing and collecting garbage in Seyhan, on February 26 the Seyhan Municipality administration accepted the workers’ demand. A message sent to the workers stated that the collective labour agreement would be implemented, that there would be no dismissals and that retroactive receivables would be paid in May and November.

Again on February 24, a large number of workers at the CHP-affiliated Beşiktaş Municipality in Istanbul walked off the job, leaving piles of garbage in the streets. Beşiktaş Municipality workers had been receiving their salaries late and in installments for a long time.

The workers of the CHP-run Efeler Municipality in Aydın stopped working on February 15 due to the non-payment of their salaries and some of their benefits, and ended the strike after being told that the payments would be made in February.

The wave of work stoppages is spreading to municipalities controlled by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

In Kayseri, 600 workers who are members of the Hizmet trade union stopped working on February

19. The workers said there are big differences in their salaries although they are doing the same work. Their salaries vary between 34,000 TL and 45,000 TL (US\$933-1,235) and they demanded a fair wage policy.

While the ruling class fears that the increasing work stoppages could trigger a nationwide mass working-class movement, the parties of the capitalist order and the trade union bureaucracies have joined forces in an attempt to prevent this danger. Both the pro-government *Türk-İş* and *Hak-İş* and the pro-opposition *DİSK* are silently complicit in the increasing attacks on the social and democratic rights of the working class, including the arrest of Türkmens.

Struggles in different sectors for decent wages and working conditions and for democratic rights, including the right to strike, need to be united around a common programme of struggle, independent of the trade union bureaucracy. The International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) seeks to unite struggling workers across workplaces, sectors and national borders. Contact us to set up a rank-and-file committee in alliance with the IWA-RFC and take the struggle forward.



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