

Mass protest by municipality workers in Istanbul amid strike wave

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Workers in Turkey are taking the path of resistance against the onslaught by the ruling class on living conditions and wages. Hundreds of workers in the Republican People's Party (CHP)-run Şişli Municipality in Istanbul joined the growing wave of wildcat strikes and protests, organising a mass protest in front of the municipality building on Wednesday.

The social attacks of the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are joined by the municipalities under the administration of the opposition parties. The Şişli workers have not received their salaries regularly for about a year and still have unpaid back wages.

When the municipality announced that salaries would not be paid again this month, workers organised meetings from Monday to discuss the way forward. It was decided to hold a march from the district centre to the municipality building on Wednesday, followed by a mass protest. Despite the Şişli District Governor's Office and the police declaring the march illegal, the workers gathered at three different points near the municipality and marched to the front of the building.

Zeynel Yiğit, head of the DİSK confederation-affiliated Genel-Şişli İstanbul Branch No. 3, said that there had been problems with the payment of the workers' wages for a year and that the municipality imposed flexible working conditions in violation of the contract. Mayor Resul Emrah Şahan refused to see them.

At the end of the protest, workers decided not to go to work on the weekend of 15-16 March because of unpaid overtime and walked out of the municipal building.

Workers are struggling to make ends meet with the rising cost of living, and their accumulated receivables are being eroded by inflation. Commenting on the longstanding problem of salary payments, one worker

said: "The banks are charging daily interest on our late payments. The municipality has already paid salaries in three instalments. This is persecution of the workers."

Another said, "We are no longer able to meet our basic needs," while another added, "I am now depressed because of these problems."

The protest by the Şişli workers follows a series of wildcat strikes and protests by municipal workers across the country in recent months. Workers in the Beşiktaş municipality in Istanbul, also ruled by the CHP, walked out on February 24 over the piecemeal payment of their salaries and unpaid wages. The administration of the Şişli Municipality forced its workers to break the strike when rubbish piles appeared in Beşiktaş, but workers warned that they would go on a solidarity strike.

Last month, municipal workers in the CHP-run Seyhan Municipality in Adana and Efeler Municipality in Aydın, as well as in Kayseri under Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) administration, staged work stoppages. Workers in Maltepe, İstanbul and Narlıdere, İzmir municipalities also organised protests in recent days.

The workers of Ataşehir and Kadıköy municipalities in İstanbul, whose strikes were previously prevented by union bureaucracies with last minute sell-out contracts, stated that their back wages have still not been paid. The Ataşehir workers are facing deregulatory attacks under the name of "performance exams."

In the face of these workers' protests, the union apparatus is seeking to get control of growing opposition.

The Genel-Şişli union had lost its credibility in the eyes of workers during the contract negotiations with the CHP municipalities last year. In Kartal Municipality, on the fourth day of the strike, the leadership of the

Genel-?? accepted a sell-out contract without the knowledge of the workers who continued to strike in protest. Union officials then ended the wildcat strike with the promise of an “additional protocol,” which was not put on the agenda.

Again, in Kadıköy Municipality, a strike was prevented with a sell-out contract signed by the Genel-?? Union leadership with the CHP administration, without consulting the workers. Facing massive anger among the workers, the elected management of Genel-?? Istanbul Branch No. 1 announced its resignation in a press release.

Both the pro-opposition DİSK and the pro-government Türk-?? and Hak-?? confederations block the working class uniting against the rising cost of living and onslaught on wages and working conditions. The affluent upper middle class union bureaucracies fear the development of a united mass labour movement as much as the corporations and the government.

This fear grows with the expansion of the workers’ struggles in several sections. The year 2024 ended with the metalworkers continuing their strike in defiance of Erdoğan’s unconstitutional strike ban. Recent weeks have witnessed mass struggles by textile workers in Gaziantep, miners of the Çayırhan Thermal Power Plant and tobacco workers in Izmir.

Physicians and health workers, who have gone on many national strikes in recent years, will strike again Friday. The Turkish Medical Association (TTB) announced that they will also be on strike March 14, Medical Day, to protest the pro-market healthcare system.

Workers at the DIGEL Textile Factory in Gazimir Ege Free Zone in Izmir, who refused to accept a low wage increase and were dismissed, continue their protests. Workers at the Temel Conta factory in Izmir have been on strike since December 10, and workers at Kaynak Tekniği (Lincoln Electric) in Kocaeli have been on strike since January 31.

Fearing that these protests will turn into a nationwide movement, the government has stepped up its attacks on workers’ democratic rights. The banning of the protests of the textile workers in Gaziantep by the governorate, the prevention of the protests by the security forces and the arbitrary arrest of Mehmet Türkmen, leader of the independent United Textile,

Weaving and Leather Workers’ Union (BİRTEK-SEN), are a warning for the entire working class.

Struggles for decent wages and working conditions and for democratic rights, such as the right to strike, can only be developed independently of the trade union apparatus and by uniting across the country and internationally.

Workers all over the world are facing a similar social attacks and the same class enemy. As Will Lehman, a socialist auto worker and former UAW presidential candidate at the Mack Trucks plant in the US, stated in his call for the release of BİRTEK-SEN leader Türkmen: “Everywhere, governments side with corporations to keep wages low and crush independent organizing.”

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is working to unite workers across workplaces, sectors and national borders. Contact us to set up a rank-and-file committee and affiliate to the IWA-RFC to take the struggle forward.



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