

# The crisis in Turkey and the fight for revolutionary leadership

Sosyalist E'tilik Grubu  
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Turkey has been rocked by mass protests involving millions of people beginning March 19. This movement, which was triggered by the arrest of Ekrem İmamoğlu, the mayor of Istanbul and presidential candidate of the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP), by the Islamist government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, raises critical political issues arising from the deep crisis of the capitalist system in Turkey and globally.

Democracy in Turkey, which has been extremely fragile since the foundation of the republic in 1923, is staggering under the pressure of the escalating global imperialist war and growing social inequality. Basic democratic rights such as the right to vote, right to due process, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and demonstration and freedom of the press are under serious threat. The Erdoğan government is throwing away its legitimacy based on elections, the constitution and the law.

A massive police state crackdown has been launched to suppress the protests. As of Thursday, nearly 2,000 people had been detained and at least 260 of them had been unlawfully imprisoned. Among those imprisoned are leaders and members of many left-wing parties, including the Labour Party (EMEP), the Workers' Democracy Party (İDP), the Left Party, the Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP), the Communist Movement of Turkey (TKH) and the Communist Party of Turkey (TKP). Levent Dölek, deputy chairman of the Revolutionary Workers Party (DİP) and an academic at Istanbul University, was arrested for taking part in an action in solidarity with the student boycott.

The Sosyalist E'tilik Grubu (Socialist Equality Group), the Turkish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, regardless of its political differences with these groups, demands the release of all political prisoners, and calls on the masses of workers and youth to defend basic democratic rights.

The mass protests by students and working people in Istanbul and almost every city in the country, defying unconstitutional bans on demonstrations and police repression, constitute one of the largest anti-government movements in the world in the last period.

The revolutionary crisis that broke out in Turkey is a harbinger of the future of other countries. The objective causes that are mobilising the broad masses—the defence of democratic rights, anger at staggering social inequality and opposition to endless imperialist war—are global. The burning question facing the working class in Turkey and internationally is the development of a revolutionary political perspective and leadership.

The reelection of Donald Trump in the United States and his attempt to establish a presidential dictatorship in the interests of the financial oligarchy have encouraged and accelerated authoritarian and fascist tendencies around the world.

The establishment of an authoritarian regime in Turkey, as in the US, is not due to the intentions of this or that politician, but to the objective needs of the ruling class. The dictatorship of the capitalist oligarchy over the economy and society brings with it a regime of political dictatorship.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained on the election of Trump:

... the coming to power of a second Trump administration represents the violent realignment of the American political superstructure to correspond with the real social relations that exist in the United States.

This is also true of Turkey. Turkey is a country divided by fierce class antagonisms and the ruling class is sitting on a social powder keg that is heading towards an explosion. The presidential dictatorship, which has entered a new phase with the arrest of İmamoğlu, is above all targeting the working class.

Turkey, the world's 17th largest economy, leads Europe in income and wealth inequality. Official inflation, which at one point reached 80 percent, has been extremely high since 2022. In addition to this, the severe austerity program pursued by the government has devastated the real wages and living standards of the working class. Class tensions have been exacerbated by the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic through a massive transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top.

The policies of the Erdoğan government, which first came to power in 2002 and integrated the Turkish economy into the world economy and capitalist globalisation more than ever before, brought about massive changes in class relations. Increasing proletarianisation and a growing working class have been turned into a source of cheap labour for international and national capital. While 65 percent of the population lived in cities in 2000, this figure is now over 90 percent. By 2022, the proportion of wage workers was over 70 percent, up from 48 percent in 2000. With a labour force of 35 million and large industrial cities, Turkey has a highly developed and increasingly militant working class.

This militancy is expressed in growing wildcat strike movements, after decades in which the trade union confederations, whether pro-government or pro-bourgeois opposition, helped to suppress the class struggle. The year 2024 ended with the metal workers challenging Erdoğan's strike ban. This year has seen mass struggles, from miners to textile workers, from health workers to construction workers.

Events in Turkey have rapidly vindicated the following assessment from the WSW 2025 New Year Statement:

The past five years have been dominated by the response of the ruling class to the capitalist crisis. The next five years will be dominated by an explosive eruption of the class struggle, which is already under way. Workers throughout the world confront an escalating global war; an ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, along with the emergence of new pathogens like H5N1 bird flu and mpox; a coordinated assault on basic democratic rights and a massive increase in exploitation and social want.

Underlying these interlinked crises is an oligarchy that subordinates all of society to profit and the accumulation of

personal wealth. The fight against the oligarchy is by its very nature a revolutionary task.

The same capitalist oligarchy, represented by the Erdoğan government, has been deeply involved in the imperialist wars of aggression in the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa for nearly 35 years in pursuit of its reactionary interests.

From the moment he took office, Erdoğan has done everything he could to support US-led imperialist aggression: He backed the war in Iraq, sent troops to Afghanistan, and assisted the regime-change wars in Libya and Syria. Whatever his rhetorical criticism, he has supported the ongoing genocide of the Zionist Israeli regime in Gaza with US-NATO backing. Turkey, whose territory contains the pipeline route for Azerbaijan's oil shipments to Israel, hosts US and NATO bases targeting Iran and its allies. Its complicity in the genocide of the Palestinians has contributed to the Erdoğan government's loss of credibility in the eyes of the population.

The inability of the Erdoğan government to fully adapt to the US-NATO offensive against Russia, which escalated after the 2014 coup in Ukraine, and its alliance with the Kurdish nationalist movement in the war for regime-change in Syria also accelerated the dictatorial turn in Turkey. In the midst of an intensifying imperialist war, tensions have risen as Turkey has tried to maneuver between the US and Russia. This culminated in the NATO-backed coup on July 15, 2016, which aimed to overthrow Erdoğan.

After the coup attempt was defeated thanks to mass opposition, he launched a violent counter-offensive by declaring a state of emergency that would last for almost two years. A controversial constitutional referendum in 2017 gave Erdoğan sweeping powers.

As the Sosyalist E'itlik Grubu stated at the time:

Erdoğan's proposed constitutional amendment shows that even the trappings of democracy in Turkey are no longer compatible with the militarist and dictatorial drive of the ruling class. ... [H]e can no longer tolerate internal political opposition. He must seek powers to crush opposition from rival sections of the bourgeoisie and from emerging opposition in the working class.

Since then, with the COVID-19 pandemic since 2020, the US-NATO war with Russia over Ukraine starting in 2022 and the Israeli genocide in Gaza starting in 2023, both the crisis of the world capitalist system and the opposition of the working masses and youth to imperialism have deepened. Today, more than ever, the Turkish bourgeoisie needs a dictatorial regime to implement a policy in line with the growing aggression of US-NATO imperialism, which is hated by the overwhelming majority of the people.

Turkey is seen as a critical ally in the Trump administration's plans to recolonize the Middle East under the full domination of US imperialism. From Palestine to Lebanon, from Syria to Yemen, the US-Israeli aggression aims at a "new Middle East" in which the map of the region will be redrawn. Iran, over which US imperialism lost complete control with the 1979 revolution, is seen as an obstacle to this goal and is under imminent threat of an imperialist-Zionist military attack.

Such aggression cannot be carried out without the support of Turkey, which shares a long border with Iran. Ankara, which played a major role in the rise to power of the al-Qaeda-affiliated Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) militia in Syria in December 2024, is seen as a critical part of a US-led anti-Iranian axis, along with the new regime in Damascus and the Kurdish nationalist movement, with which Turkey is trying to reach an agreement through imprisoned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah

Öcalan.

That's why Trump wants to work closely with Erdoğan, whom he calls "a good leader" and "my friend." Erdoğan spoke to Trump by phone three days before ?mamo?lu's detention. Trump's Middle East envoy described the phone call as "great" and "transformational." Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan received a warm welcome in Washington on March 25-26, amid arrests and mass protests in Turkey. On the same days, Elon Musk's X/Twitter blocked access to numerous accounts broadcasting protests and police brutality in Turkey.

The European imperialist powers also see the Erdoğan government as a critical ally in the midst of the growing tensions with the United States and the deepening crisis in NATO. The European powers, who want to continue the war in Ukraine in opposition to a US peace agreement with Russia, have formed a "coalition of the willing," and are planning to send NATO troops to Ukraine as "peacekeepers." Turkey, which controls the straits from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea and has the second-largest military force in NATO, is believed to be playing a major role in these arson plans that could trigger a nuclear conflict in the name of "peace."

The dirty deal between the EU and Turkey against refugees also plays an important role in Erdoğan's calculation that his European allies will turn a blind eye to the repression of the political opposition in Turkey—despite their pro-EU and pro-NATO stance. Ankara hosts some 5 million refugees fleeing from imperialist wars and their consequences, especially in Syria, and prevents them from crossing to Europe.

The Sosyalist E'itlik Grubu calls for the release of ?mamo?lu and all other CHP members arrested in violation of their right to a fair trial. However, this does not imply any political support for the CHP. By its very nature, the CHP cannot advance the struggle for democratic rights. On the contrary, the CHP is trying to divert the mass movement into the electoral framework and thus suppress it. Like the Erdoğan government, it is opposed to a revolutionary working class movement that would challenge the capitalist system and bourgeois rule from which these fundamental problems stem.

The CHP is a bourgeois nationalist party that is aligned with the same imperialist powers that collaborate with the Erdoğan government and has proved once again that it is incapable of defending democratic rights. In order to calm down the fears of the Turkish bourgeoisie of a revolution, the CHP sought to reassure the imperialist powers and get their support by declaring that it is a "NATO party." Numerous Stalinist and Pabloite political tendencies have also fulfilled their role of preventing the development of a revolutionary socialist alternative by completely subordinating the mass movement to the leadership and politics of the CHP.

The spinelessness and political capitulation of the CHP as a bourgeois party is part of a global phenomenon. As Leon Trotsky, who co-led the October Revolution of 1917 with Vladimir Lenin and founded the Fourth International in 1938, explained in his theory of permanent revolution, no faction of the bourgeoisie in the world in the present epoch can consistently defend democracy, social equality and an anti-imperialist policy. These tasks fall to the working class, which creates social wealth and pays the price of imperialist war. The task of establishing workers' power and implementing socialist policies is not a national but an international one, and can be accomplished only through the victory of the socialist revolution on a global scale.

The working class in Turkey must take its place in this struggle against imperialist war and the authoritarian regime under the slogan of the Middle East Socialist Federation. The fundamental question in Turkey and in all countries is to build a revolutionary party to lead the developing movement of the working class. This means building the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Parties affiliated to it. Those who agree with this perspective must act upon it and participate in the building of the Sosyalist E'itlik Partisi (Turkey).



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