

Mass arrests ahead of May Day demonstrations in Turkey

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More than 150 members of left parties, trade unions and youth organisations were detained in house raids on Tuesday and Wednesday in major cities including Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, ahead of the May Day demonstrations.

One of the grounds for the police operations in Istanbul is that workers and youth want to celebrate May Day in Taksim Square. Since 2013, the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in violation of the constitution, has closed this historically important square for the working class to May Day demonstrations.

In a 2023 ruling, the Constitutional Court, referring to the massacre that took place during the 1977 May Day rally, ruled that Taksim was the “common memory” and “symbolic value” of workers and labourers and that the ban was a violation of rights. In 1977, 34 people were killed and 136 wounded by gunfire during the celebrations in Taksim Square. The fact that the massacre was never properly investigated reinforced the perception that it was a state reaction to the growing class struggle.

The Socialist Equality Group released a statement on X/Twitter on Wednesday condemning “the arrest of large numbers of people in house raids in many provinces, especially in Istanbul, just before May Day”.

“These operations are meant to intimidate not only those detained but also the broader masses of workers and youth who took to the streets last month,” the statement said.

“Demonstrating or calling for demonstrations in Taksim or elsewhere on May Day is not a crime, but a fundamental democratic right,” the statement added, calling for “the immediate release of those detained for exercising their democratic rights and all political

prisoners”.

This latest police-state repression is part of the government’s drive to crush social and political opposition by establishing a presidential dictatorship that ignores the constitution and the law. To this end, the government is using its control over the judiciary as a tool of intimidation.

Last month, Ekrem İmamoğlu, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) mayor of Istanbul, who was Erdoğan’s main rival and appeared to be ahead of him in the latest polls, was arrested and sent to prison. İmamoğlu’s arrest sparked a wave of mass protests that spread across the country.

Millions of people, especially young people, took to the streets to oppose this attack on their right to vote and be elected. The CHP’s presidential primary election, in which İmamoğlu was the only candidate, was attended by 15.5 million people, when only 1 million were expected.

The potential of this mass movement to trigger an independent and revolutionary working class movement has led the government to launch a large-scale crackdown.

After İmamoğlu’s arrest, more than 2,000 people were detained and more than 300 were arrested for participating in peaceful protests. The arbitrariness and illegality of these measures—aimed at intimidating the working class and youth—was so obvious that most of those detained were released in the following weeks. But almost 50 people are still in prison.

The CHP, another party of big business, did its best to contain the protests, which were beyond its control, and to channel them towards the next elections.

The Erdoğan government’s criminalisation of even calling for a protest, let alone participating in a legal protest, is an expression of a global trend towards

authoritarianism that has gained momentum with the return to power of President Donald Trump in the US.

As the WSWWS explained, Trump is modelling himself on the authoritarian theories of Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt. Schmitt argued that in a “State of Exception”, the leader of a country has unlimited executive power over existing laws.

In the US, Trump is illegally deporting migrants to concentration camps, kidnapping pro-Palestinian students and imprisoning them for deportation. The Alien Enemies Act is used to justify these practices. A few days ago, Milwaukee Circuit Court Judge Hannah Dugan was arrested for blocking the arrest of an immigrant.

As the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in the US explains, “The scope and character of this repression are without precedent in modern American history. The only historical parallels are the actions of Nazi Germany and the CIA-backed military dictatorships of postwar Latin America.”

The Socialist Equality Group said in its May Day statement, “In Turkey, as in the US, this authoritarian regime is essentially targeting the working class, the only social force that can put an end to the rule of the capitalist class, take power and establish a genuinely democratic regime.”

In Turkey and internationally, the working class needs to be equipped with an international and socialist perspective to counter this ruling class offensive and to take the lead in the growing mass opposition against social inequality, authoritarianism and war.

However, a nationalist and reformist perspective dominated the May Day rallies called by trade unions and parties in many cities. In Istanbul, where the most important May Day celebrations in the country took place, the debate centred on whether the demonstration would be held in Taksim or Kadıköy.

Last year, the CHP and its trade union allies, the DİSK and KESK confederations, had called for a May Day celebration in Taksim, but in the face of police obstruction they quickly called for dispersal and left the area, leaving the remaining protesters facing the riot police. More than 200 people were detained, while dozens were detained for months.

This year, the pro-bourgeois opposition DISK and KESK are calling for a rally in the Kadıköy district, while the pro-government Türk-İş is calling for the

Kartal district of Istanbul, fulfilling their function of dividing the workers along the axis of the rival factions of the ruling class. All trade union confederations are directly or indirectly collaborating in the implementation of the government’s severe austerity programme against workers. In the midst of the mass protests that erupted last month, the trade union bureaucracies did their best to prevent workers being mobilized as an independent force.

The ongoing genocide in Gaza, the Zionist-imperialist aggression against Iran and its allies in the Middle East and the unfolding global imperialist war of division are not on their agenda. Neither is the need to ensure the political independence of the working class from all pro-imperialist capitalist establishment parties, including Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the CHP, and to mobilise it in the struggle for international socialism.

Only the Socialist Equality Group has called for such a May Day. This is part of the call for a unique worldwide International May Day Online Meeting of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world Trotskyist movement of which we are a part. We urge our readers to register now to take part in this important event, which continues the revolutionary tradition of May Day.



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