Lessons to be learned from the Izmir municipal workers' strike

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The strike by 23,000 workers at the ?ZELMAN, ?ZENERJ? and Ege?ehir companies of the Izmir Metropolitan Municipality (?zBB), which started on May 29, ended on its seventh day. The agreement signed by the Social Democratic Public Employees' Union (SODEM-SEN), which represents the municipality, and the Genel-?? union, which is affiliated with D?SK, did not result in any gains for the workers.

The workers were demanding a 60 percent rise in line with the strikers' declared principle of "equal pay for equal work". Before the strike, the municipality offered a wage increase of 29.16 percent, but this was increased to only 30 percent in the signed contract, mocking the workers. For the next six months, the wage increase will be calculated by adding two points to inflation.

On Tuesday, the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat) announced the official annual rate of consumer inflation as 35.41 percent. The independent organisation ENAG calculated this rate at 73.88 percent. In previous years, real inflation, as measured by ENAG, had long been above 100 percent.

While both the CHP and the unions hypocritically acknowledge that official inflation does not reflect the real cost of living, these increases mean that workers will continue to lose wages in real terms. In recent years, workers in Turkey, as around the world, have suffered sharp losses in real wages and living standards due to the rising cost of living and the growing social offensive of the ruling class.

Workers reacted against the increase of only 0.84 percent after the seven-day strike stating that this increase does not even cover the seven days of wages they lost during the strike. A worker told *Evrensel* newspaper, "With this collective bargaining agreement, we have lost everything we had. Most of our rights have been scaled back." Another said, "There is no equality. Then what have we been waiting for 5 and a half months? If only we had accepted the offer in January when it first started, then our wages would not be eroded by inflation." said another.

The Izmir strike has many lessons for workers' future struggles. The most important of these is that the CHP, like President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an's Justice and Development Party (AKP), is a capitalist establishment party hostile to the working class. It is therefore crucial for workers to take matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracy to prevent the sellout contracts and advance their struggles.

To suppress the strike, the municipal administration, including Mayor Cemil Tugay, and the CHP waged a smear campaign in the press and social media, targeting workers and their right to strike. The main arguments of this dirty campaign were that the "simple" workers were demanding exorbitant wages and that the strike served the Erdo?an government. This right-wing anti-worker campaign targeting the right to strike, a fundamental democratic right, has exposed the rottenness of the CHP's claim to defend democracy.

Both IzBB and Tugay are following the government's policy of wage suppression, citing the country's generally low wage level. However, when the government increased the minimum wage by 30 percent for 2025, the CHP hypocritically issued statements condemning the move.

Referring to the low official minimum wage and using it as a weapon when discussing municipal workers' or the working class's wages confirms that the CHP and its media spin-doctors fully support the government's class war agenda. A pro-working class stance against the capitalist class and its dominant policies centres on workers' and their families' ability to live a decent life. This wage cannot, of course, be below the poverty line, calculated on the basis of basic needs, and must be constantly increased at the rate of real inflation, which in Turkey is massive. However, these transitional demands must be combined with a socialist perspective, which argues that there can be no "fair wages" for workers under capitalist exploitation, and that the ultimate goal should be "the abolition of the wage system". [1]

According to a survey conducted by the Türk-?? Confederation, the monthly food expenditure required for a family of four to have a healthy, balanced and adequate diet increased to 25 thousand TL as of May 2025. In addition to this, the total amount required for other essential monthly expenses such as clothing, housing (including rent, electricity, water and fuel), transportation, education and healthcare (poverty line) increased to 81,733 TL.

However, the wages demanded by the workers do not even reach this poverty line identified by the union bureaucracy.

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They stated that, based on the municipality's current offer, their wages would amount to around just 45 thousand TL.

Mayor Tugay portrayed the workers as money-hungry and claimed that nobody in Turkey received wages like these. In fact, these wages are paid in other enterprises belonging to the same municipality. The workers' main demand during the strike was therefore "equal pay for equal work", meaning that their salaries should be equal to other workers doing the same job in the municipality.

Tugay systematically incited the people of Izmir against the workers, claiming that meeting their demands would put the municipal budget in dire straits and prevent the municipality from providing services. This budget, which is not open to scrutiny by municipal workers or the people of Izmir, is primarily organised to benefit corporations and is financed by cuts to workers' wages and benefits.

The municipality actively mobilized a strike breaking operation utilizing scab labour in violation of the law. Instead of striking cleaning workers, workers from other municipalities were brought in to collect garbage. The mayor himself picked up garbage in front of the media and reacted strongly to being accused of scabbing.

Another aspect of the smear campaign against the strike is the claim that it is unjustified and politically motivated. Mayor Tugay has repeatedly attempted to discredit the strike by referring to the government's crackdown on CHP-run municipalities.

On the third day of the strike, Tugay said, "How can we understand a strike rally in Izmir when there are operations [against CHP municipalities]?" In another speech, he said: "The economic situation of the country is being ignored, and this is undermining us. Five CHP mayors have been arrested and D?SK is holding a rally here. Who is undermining whom?"

Erdo?an, who has banned more than 20 strikes on the grounds that they were "disruptive to national security", recently announced that a strike ban in the municipal sector is on the agenda, citing the piles of rubbish left behind by Besiktas Municipality workers who were not paid their wages and effectively stopped working. This reactionary campaign, in which the CHP effectively criminalised strikes—a constitutional right won through great workers' struggles—played into the hands of the Erdo?an government and helped its plans.

In last year's local elections, the CHP was the undeserving beneficiary of opposition to the government, channelling social discontent toward itself and was the first party. The pseudo-left and the D?SK bureaucracy played a big role in the CHP's success.

The strike of the municipal workers, just one year after the elections, exposes not only the CHP. It also exposes the entire pseudo-left that presents the CHP as a progressive alternative to Erdo?an's AKP, especially the Turkish Workers' Party (T?P), which is in electoral alliance with the CHP.

CHP leader Özgür Özel, explaining their unprincipled alliance with the T?P last year, said: "We worked with T?P as follows. They did not nominate candidates in places where the CHP was running neck-and-neck and where there was a risk of losing." Izmir was one of the provinces where the T?P could not field a candidate.

Another important lesson that workers should take away from the Izmir strike is that trade union leaders cannot be trusted, no matter how sharp their rhetoric. Over the past year, collective bargaining negotiations between SODEM-SEN, which represents CHP municipalities, and Genel-?? resulted in sellout contracts that disregarded the workers' determination and demands.

For decades, trade unions affiliated with D?SK and other confederations have imposed policies that have impoverished workers. The D?SK confederation, which the pseudo-left has been promoting as "leftist", "opposition" and "class unionist" for years, has interest ties to the political world of the ruling class.

Three of the four presidents of the DISK confederation since 1994 have been MPs for social democratic parties. The previous president, Kani Beko, has had an illustrious career, taking him from the leadership of the Genel-?? union to the DISK presidency and, finally, to the position of CHP Izmir deputy.

One worker told *Evrensel* the following about the impact of the political relations between D?SK and CHP on workers: "During the minimum wage protest, all the [CHP] mayors marched at the front behind the D?SK banner. But the wages they [CHP municipalities] gave us were low. Now we are experiencing the repercussions of this."

It underscores the critical need for workers to build independent rank-and-file committees to take control of their struggles into their own hands.

[1] Karl Marx, *Value, Price and Profit*, 1865. "They ought to understand that, with all the miseries it imposes upon them, the present system simultaneously engenders the *material conditions* and the *social forms* necessary for an economical reconstruction of society. Instead of the *conservative* motto: '*A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!*' they ought to inscribe on their banner the *revolutionary* watchword: '*Abolition of the wages system!*'"

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