

# Turkish independent union leader Mehmet Türkmen arrested

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Mehmet Türkmen, general secretary of the independent rank-and-file union B?RTEK-SEN (United Textile, Weaving and Leather Workers' Union), was arrested on Monday at a court appearance following a speech he had delivered. Türkmen was detained in the early hours of Sunday morning during a gendarmerie raid on his home in Gaziantep, and all electronic devices in his residence were confiscated.

Ula? Sevinç, chairman of the Sosyalist E?itlik Partisi—Dördüncü Enternasyonal (Socialist Equality Party—Fourth International), condemned his detention in a statement posted on X, which was reported by the daily *Evensel*. He wrote: “The detentions of Türkmen and other workers' leaders are aimed at intimidating the broad masses of workers who are entering into growing struggles against the problems stemming from the capitalist system and its defenders. All workers must oppose this repression, which eliminates the basic democratic rights including freedom of speech, and demand the immediate release of Türkmen.”

Türkmen's arrest was met with protests from numerous organisations and workers. A refinery worker who spoke to *Evensel* said: “We watched the raid [video] on Mehmet Türkmen's home. The door being broken down, the house being searched, electronic devices being seized. Those images are not merely images of an operation. They give a picture of the repression that the labour struggle faces in this country.”

The formal charge brought against Türkmen is “inciting the public to hatred and enmity”—a charge that has been increasingly and arbitrarily deployed by the government in recent years against workers' leaders, journalists and opposition politicians.

Around 400 workers at S?rma Hal?, a carpet company belonging to the ?ireci Group, walked off the job on March 9 in protest against months of unpaid wages. On March 13, Türkmen addressed the workers' protest at Bal?kl? Square in Gaziantep. The speech that has been used as the pretext for his arrest reads as follows:

Workers have not received their wages regularly for months. They are not asking for anything extra, just that their pay be deposited on time. In return, they receive threatening messages. If a worker is late paying a bill by even a day, interest is added—yet the money owed to the worker is the same.

The workers in the factories are the ones who built this country and carry it on their backs. They gather to protest injustice, and hundreds of police surround them. Why are so many police lined up in front of workers whenever they want to hold a press statement or a march? Build your barricades against the bosses, not the workers. This anger is building. With each new injustice added every day, you are accumulating fury and rebellion in the hearts of workers.

What the court has chosen to treat as a crime is a stark, plain-spoken description of wage theft. That these words have been made the pretext for an arrest reveals this fact with unmistakable clarity: The brutal capitalist offensive—which makes it ever more difficult to contain class tensions through democratic forms of rule and the official trade union apparatus—necessitates the construction of an authoritarian regime in which basic rights are abolished. The ruling class's assault on democratic rights and its assault on the living and working conditions of the working class are inseparable.

Following his arrest, Türkmen exposed the class-based nature of this ruling:

From now on, whenever an employer files a complaint [against me], just arrest me and send me straight to prison. Don't play these [court] games. Skip the statements, the trials, and the hearings—just get past all that. Implement whatever the employer decides immediately. In this country, ten workers die

every day in factories, losing their arms and hands. Not a single employer is even questioned, yet a union representative is arrested based on an employer's complaint simply for speaking out about it.

Türkmen has repeatedly become a target of the state attacks—as have many other workers' leaders—precisely because he leads a workers' movement emerging from the rank and file. In February 2025, during a wave of mass wildcat strikes encompassing more than 20 factories in the Bağcınar Organised Industrial Zone in Gaziantep, Türkmen was detained twice, held for 36 days and subsequently subjected to approximately a month of house arrest. During that period, the Gaziantep Governorship issued an unconstitutional decree banning all demonstrations across the province.

The Sosyalist Egitlik Grubu—the predecessor of the Sosyalist Egitlik Partisi—explained the logic behind the persecution of Türkmen and the bans imposed on workers at that time: “The main concern of the government and the entire ruling class is to prevent the fundamental antagonism in society, class divisions and thus the class struggle, from coming to the fore and preventing millions of workers from uniting and mobilizing for their social and democratic aspirations.”

At the time, the *World Socialist Web Site* conducted an international campaign for Türkmen's release. Will Lehman, a rank-and-file worker at Mack Trucks, who ran for the United Auto Workers (UAW) president in 2022, issued a solidarity statement in which he declared: “Türkmen's arrest is an attack on the entire working class,” adding: “The answer is rank-and-file organization and international unity. Workers in Turkey, the US, and worldwide must unite outside the control of the union bureaucracies and pro-corporate politicians.”

These concerns of the ruling class have intensified sharply amid the escalation of the US-Israeli war against Iran and the growing risk of Türkiye being drawn into the conflict. The government is determined to give no quarter to any form of social or political opposition—above all when it comes from the working class.

But the same contradictions of the capitalist system—which drive it toward dictatorship and war—also intensify the class struggle. The diversion of social resources towards rearmament and a handful of capitalist oligarchs, the erosion of real wages in the face of rising cost of living, unpaid wages, factory closures and the stripping away of social rights are all provoking militant struggles of workers and wildcat strikes. These struggles are developing independently of, and indeed in spite of, the trade union

apparatus.

At the end of January, Migros warehouse workers walked out at 12 warehouses across 10 cities in protest against a below-inflation pay raise. Of the 7,500 workers involved, 5,500 fought under the leadership of the independent rank-and-file union DGD-Sen—not only against the corporation and police crackdown, but also against the bureaucracy of Tez-Koop-??, the union affiliated with the pro-government Türk-?? confederation (Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions).

At the end of February, 1,243 miners at Polyak Elyez in the Kızılk district of İzmir launched a wildcat strike under the leadership of Bağcımsız Maden ?? to defend their jobs and social rights. The workers, who moved to take over management of the mine, refused to retreat in the face of tear gas and detentions as they broke through gendarmerie barricades—and ultimately won their demands.

Both the emergence of a rank-and-file workers' movement and the state repression aimed at crushing this movement are global phenomena. As Will Lehman stated in his solidarity message with the Polyak miners, the issues facing workers in Türkiye—“unpaid wages, unsafe conditions, attacks on seniority, erosion of benefits—are the same issues facing workers in auto plants, warehouses and factories in the US and internationally. Corporations operate globally,” Lehman said. “Our response must also be global”—and he added: “No worker should stand alone.”

Workers and youth in Türkiye and around the world must defend Mehmet Türkmen, who has been imprisoned for his leadership of workers' struggles and demand his immediate release. The fight for his freedom is an inseparable part of the broader struggle for democratic and social rights.



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