

“This system will change through the workers’ struggle”

Turkish independent textile union leader Mehmet Türkmen acquitted

Bar?? Demir
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On Tuesday, one of the landmark cases of state repression against the independent workers’ movement in Türkiye came to a close in Gaziantep. Mehmet Türkmen, the general president of B?RTEK-SEN, who had been in prison for almost two months, was acquitted of the baseless charge of “publicly disseminating misleading information” and released.

The acquittal came in the wake of a solidarity campaign for Türkmen, which was carried out both in Türkiye and internationally. The sympathy shown by large sections of the working class towards him was in stark contrast to the union bureaucracy’s guilty silence.

On the same day as the trial, the D?SK leadership—which failed to issue a single statement in defence of Türkmen—hosted Labour and Social Security Minister Vedat I?khan. This is no coincidence: the union bureaucracy, integrated with the state, views such leaders as a challenge. Türkmen founded the independent B?RTEK-SEN after being expelled from D?SK in 2022.

From the beginning, the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) and the Sosyalist E?itlik Partisi—Dördüncü Enternasyonal (Socialist Equality Party—Fourth International) have characterized Türkmen’s arrest and persecution as state repression aimed at crushing the developing independent workers’ movement, expressed in a growing number of wildcat strikes and acts of resistance. We have called on workers and young people to fight for Türkmen’s freedom and democratic rights. At the 2026 International May Day Online Rally, demands were made for the release of Türkmen and other prisoners of the class struggle.

State repression is carried out in the context of a rising cost of living and deteriorating working and living conditions. As economic hardship intensifies due to the devastating consequences of the US-Israeli war against Iran, President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an’s government continues to implement a severe austerity program on behalf of the

capitalist oligarchy. The overwhelming majority of the public opposes the war against Iran, and the government, which condemns Iran’s right to self-defense, faces growing opposition to its war and austerity policies.

Türkmen, who had participated in a protest on March 13 organized by approximately 400 S?rma Carpets workers in Gaziantep—who had not been paid for months and had gone on strike on 9 March—was arrested on the grounds of his speech there. In this speech, which fell within the scope of his constitutional rights, Türkmen explained that workers across the country were facing difficulties in receiving their wages and that, when they protested, they were met with police repression. He pointed out that corporations were being protected by the state in the face of both workplace fatalities and wage theft.

According to *Evrensel*, during the hearing, Türkmen stated in his defence, “I know for a fact that this investigation was launched following a complaint by the boss of ?ireci [textile company]. I was charged because I demanded accountability for the loss of an arm.” Noting that at least 555 workers have died in workplace accidents in Gaziantep over the past 13 years, Türkmen added, “By locking me up, you are sending a message to employers: ‘Exploit as much as you want; we’ll lock up anyone who speaks out.’”

Türkmen added, “All 555 of these names are on record. Not a single employer has been jailed or detained. Why is someone losing a hand or an arm every day when the textile industry is one of the least risky sectors? It’s because the drive for profit is more valuable to employers than their workers’ lives.”

Ahead of the trial, textile workers, along with numerous representatives of political parties, trade unions, and professional organizations from many cities across Türkiye and from Europe, gathered in front of the courthouse to show their support for Türkmen. The speeches delivered emphasized the baseless nature of the charges against Türkmen and highlighted how the judiciary is being used as

a tool to suppress workers' rights and the opposition.

In his speech, Mikail K?l?çalp, General Secretary of B?RTEK-SEN, stated that Türkmen's "crime" was "standing in solidarity with workers who couldn't receive their wages and demanding accountability for workplace fatalities." K?l?çalp said, "Türkmen was arrested for saying, 'The laws don't apply to the rich.' We ask: How many employers who have skimmed off workers' compensation, fired workers, and usurped their labor have walked through this door [of the courthouse]? It is not our words that are misleading, but this unjust system itself."

According to a report by *Evreysel*, "In the two months since Türkmen's arrest, at least ten workers have lost their lives in Gaziantep and 338 across the country. No employer has been held accountable."

Tugay Bek, one of Türkmen's lawyers, noted that in 2025 alone, 2,555 workers lost their lives as a result of "workplace accidents," and that this number has exceeded 25,000 over the past decade. In other words, Türkiye sees worker deaths each year on a scale six times larger than the 2014 Soma miner massacre—and not a single employer has been held accountable for this.

Mehmet Türkmen's mother, Ay?e Türkmen, also addressed the crowd outside the courthouse, saying, "Was my son arrested because he stood up for the rights of workers who had lost their limbs? I've come to take my son home." His uncle added, "If Mehmet had sided with the bosses, he would have had a house, a car, and everything else, but he chose to stand with the workers and support their struggle, and that's why he's in prison."

During the hearing, Türkmen's lawyers stated that the number of workers killed in workplace accidents in Gaziantep had doubled over the past 10 years, and that this was due to the fact that those responsible had not been brought to justice. The lawyers requested that workers who had lost limbs in workplace accidents be called to testify; the court denied this request.

A worker from the Ba?p?nar Organized Industrial Zone, who was among the audience and had lost his fingers in a workplace accident, stood up and shouted, "I'm here with my hand that has no fingers. I stand with Chairman Mehmet."

Despite the case lacking legitimacy in the eyes of much of the public and constitutional rights being blatantly violated, the prosecution insisted on its demands in its closing argument. It sought a prison sentence for Türkmen for "publicly disseminating misleading information" and called for a "political ban" to prevent him from engaging in union activities.

Even by the standards of bourgeois legal norms that are constantly being violated, convicting Türkmen for his

remarks would have been a highly controversial decision. As workers increasingly question the reliability of the legal system, there is a growing sense that wildcat strikes and struggles are the only way to secure their rights. The recent struggle by the Doruk Mining workers is a clear example of this.

The Türkmen case is not an isolated one. As the class struggle intensifies, state repression against workers' leaders acting independently of the union apparatus is also increasing. Leaders of Ba??ms?z Maden-?? and miners who led the struggles at Polyak Mining and Doruk Mining have been detained on multiple occasions; workers have faced repression from the police and gendarmerie.

At the end of March, Esra I??k, a village leader who has been fighting against the handover of the Akbelen Forest and its lands in Mu?la to mining companies, became the target of the same state repression mechanism. Although the 6th Chamber of the Council of State suspended the implementation of the presidency's "emergency expropriation" decision last week, I??k was released on Monday under a travel ban that prevents her from leaving the country.

Although the charges against Türkmen have been dropped, the disinformation law and the judicial system that enforces it remain in place. Workers in Gaziantep, across Türkiye, and around the world continued to work under the same precarious conditions, to be exploited, and to fall victim to workplace accidents.

Türkmen drew attention to this reality after his release, saying: "The order that steals workers' fingers, hands, and lives in this country will certainly change, and if it is to change, it will be through the struggle of the workers who are fighting for their very lives and for their labor."

This requires the construction of new rank-and-file organizations based on an international strategy, independent of the trade union apparatus and the establishment parties. The International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees is fighting for this.



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