

# Turkish shipyard workers revolt against union sellout on eve of strike

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As workers at the Sedef Shipyard in Tuzla, Istanbul, owned by Turkon Holding, prepared to walk out on strike on June 18, Necip Nalbanto?lu, general president of the Turkish Port, Dock and Shipbuilding Industry Workers' Union (Dok Gemi-??), affiliated to the Türk-?? confederation, came to the shipyard on June 17 and, behind the backs of the workers, signed a sellout contract and called off the strike.

The workers, who had voted overwhelmingly in favor of a strike, responded by marching through the shipyard chanting, "Union, resign!" and drove the union bureaucrats out of the workplace.

These scenes are an expression of the accumulated anger of the working class. The response is directed not only against the impoverishment and loss of social gains that workers have suffered over decades as a result of the union apparatus's collaboration with the corporations and the government, but also against the usurpation of their democratic will.

What unfolded at the Sedef Shipyard, which employs 2,000 workers, is a concrete manifestation of the steadily intensifying conflict between the rank-and-file workers and the union bureaucracy. As is the case across the world, in Türkiye too the official union apparatus has over decades been transformed into an industrial police force for capital and the state, its principal function being to suppress the class struggle.

Workers must counter this by taking up the program advanced by Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker nominated for the presidency of the United Auto Workers (UAW) in the United States: abolish the bureaucracy and transfer power to the shop floor. To this end, Lehman calls for building rank-and-file committees in every workplace, which will unite under the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The Sedef Shipyard workers had demanded a flat wage increase of 10,000 Turkish lira plus an additional 15 percent raise; the holiday bonus raised to between 7,000 and 10,000 lira; and a bank promotion payment. The contract signed by the union, however, imposed on the workers a mere 9 percent raise and a half-salary bonus. No bank promotion payment was granted.

Türkiye now ranks among the highest countries in Europe for social inequality. In the face of the rising cost of living, real wages continue to fall. Official inflation, which in recent years climbed as high as 80 percent, stood at 32 percent as of May. The more reliable calculation of the independent Inflation Research Group (ENAG) puts it at 53 percent. By the official rate, Türkiye ranks first in Europe and fifth in the world. The countries ahead of Türkiye are, respectively, Venezuela—the target of long-standing US sanctions and aggression; South Sudan, which is gripped by civil war; Iran, against which the US has launched a criminal war and imposed punitive sanctions; and Argentina.

Dok Gemi-?? holds the position of "authorized" union in nearly every major shipyard in Tuzla. The union is a telling example of the privileged position of the trade union bureaucracy in Türkiye. According to the daily *Sözcü*, Nalbanto?lu has established a kind of dynasty within the union's leadership.

He has occupied this seat since 1991—that is, for 35 years. His son, Emre Ahmet Nalbanto?lu, was made head of the union's Marmara Branch in 2014, the very year he began "working" at the shipyard, and was subsequently elevated to deputy general president. This dynasty derives its power not from the workers but from the collaboration it maintains with the corporations and governments.

Workers from other shipyards who spoke to the daily

*Evrensel* pointed to the potential for a struggle from below, independent of the union apparatus. A worker from Desan, saying that Dok Gemi-?? has never asked the workers anything, added: “These men [the union officials] are as dangerous to the worker as the bosses are. We have to fight them as well.”

A worker from Hatsan said that the state, the companies and the union bureaucrats had joined hands against the Sedef Shipyard workers, and that the bureaucrats should be driven out wherever they go. A worker from Anadolu Shipyard stated: “They show the door to anyone who asks for a raise; they threaten them. And this union, taking courage from that, is able to scheme behind the workers’ backs. Even so, I see the solution in unity.”

Shipyards require dry docks, slipways, giant cranes, coastal land and heavy equipment. The sector is held in the hands of a small number of monopolies. Each ship most often represents a colossal, project-specific structure built singly or in small numbers; the overwhelming bulk of the skilled work—steel cutting and bending, welding, assembly, painting, scaffolding, piping and electrical installation—is still carried out by human hands and physical labor. In other words, rather than a factory dominated by machinery and workbenches, the prevailing process is that of an “open-air assembly site” in which living labor is decisive. This makes shipyards a labor-intensive sector, one in which labor costs are regarded as the item most easily cut under the pressure of global competition.

This is extremely arduous and dangerous work that demands a skilled workforce: it involves working at great heights, welding in enclosed and cramped spaces such as a ship’s hold, hauling heavy loads, the risk of fire and explosion, and moving about beneath cranes. The rise in workplace accidents and workplace killings as the sector has grown has been a result of the companies’ disregard for safety measures and their speeding-up of the work, driven by the profit motive.

According to a 2008 statement by the Limter-?? union in the sector, while 27 worker deaths were recorded between 1985 and 2000, that number rose to 41 between 2000 and 2007. In 2008, as workplace killings in the shipyards came to dominate the national agenda, two strikes were held under the leadership of Limter-??. According to data from Workers’ Health and Work Safety Assembly (?S?G), 226 shipyard

workers lost their lives between 2013 and 2020; the deaths resulted most often from drowning, crushing, falls from heights, explosions, burns and being struck by objects.

To cut costs and keep workers under control, the corporations rely on the subcontracting system alongside the union apparatus. On a single ship, workers employed by dozens of different subcontracting firms labor side by side. This not only lifts responsibility for workplace safety off the shoulders of the main firm, but also shields the companies against fluctuations in orders and, by dividing the workers, makes organization and common struggle more difficult.

At the same time, logistical factors cause the sector to be concentrated in particular regions, and this provides an important platform for the collective struggle of the workers. In Türkiye, alongside Tuzla, there are other major shipyard zones in Alia?a, ?zmir and Alt?nova, Yalova. In total, the sector is reported to employ about 100,000 workers. One example of this immense social force emerging collectively came in 2022, when a walkout that began over a demand for a wage increase at a ship-breaking facility in Alia?a rapidly swelled into a strike wave that spread to all 22 facilities.

The way forward for workers in the shipbuilding industry in Türkiye and internationally lies in organizing and mobilizing this power independently of the union apparatus. This requires building rank-and-file committees that will unite workers across divisions such as permanent/subcontracted, white-collar/blue-collar, different workplaces and unions—and beyond national borders. We call on workers at the Sedef Shipyard and other shipyards to contact us in order to build such a rank-and-file committee.



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