

The way forward in the struggle of Istanbul's Çapa Medical Faculty refectory workers

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The fight of roughly 100 refectory workers dismissed from Istanbul University's Çapa Medical Faculty Hospital is completing its second week. On July 9, after the subcontracting company running food production and service changed hands in a tender, the workers were thrown out of their jobs without payment of their severance and notice compensation or accumulated back wages.

Some had prepared and served meals to patients, their relatives and health workers at the same hospital for 20 years. Following the tender, they and their families were plunged overnight into a future without security. The company that won the tender has announced it will not rehire the existing workers, but the university administration is attempting to evade its legal and de facto responsibility as the primary employer by shifting the blame solely onto the subcontractor.

The workers report that food distribution has been dumped on caregivers and cleaning staff, even though it is not in their job descriptions, and that casual day labour on daily wages has been introduced in a public hospital. The price competition in the tender is based on the intensified exploitation of the workers, and the university administration benefits from it. The new firm will replace the existing senior employees with minimum wage and precarious workers.

In hospitals, universities and public institutions across Türkiye, tens of thousands of refectory, cleaning and security workers are employed under precarious conditions within the subcontracting system. Every tender period means the threat of unemployment and the usurpation of rights for the workers. While subcontracting companies grow into conglomerates on public tenders, workers are subjected to wages that do not rise even at the official rate of inflation, unpaid compensation and mounting pressure.

This deepening regime of exploitation is an integral part of the austerity programme implemented by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government in line with the demands of the capitalist oligarchy. While resources allocated to health care and education are slashed and public services are marketized, an ever-growing share of the budget is funnelled into militarism, the corporations and interest payments.

As imperialist war and aggression—led by Türkiye's NATO ally, the United States—escalate across the Middle East and the wider world, ruling classes everywhere are sacrificing social spending to the demands of militarism. The unemployment and insecurity being imposed on the Çapa workers are part of a single program being enforced on the entire working class, from the United States to Germany and from Argentina to South Korea.

The Erdoğan government presented its 2018 regulation transferring subcontracted workers to permanent public positions as a great victory. The eight years that have passed since then have proven this to be a lie: hundreds of thousands of workers continue to work in public institutions without job security. This demonstrates that the fate of the workers in Çapa cannot be left to appeals to the ministries.

The Çapa refectory workers want their legitimate demands met—reinstatement to their jobs, payment of all outstanding dues, and permanent, secure jobs. However, for these demands to be realized for the entire working class, it means unsuccessful protests, press releases, or applications to ministries must be replaced by mass class struggle. The workers must establish their own independent rank-and-file committees and prepare for a united struggle armed with demands that will mobilize their class brothers and sisters.

The potential for this exists. In public hospitals, thousands of doctors, nurses, caregivers, cleaning and security staff face attacks on their wages and working conditions. These hospitals primarily serve working-class people who lack access to private health insurance and private hospitals.

The struggle of the Çapa workers must appeal directly to the tens of thousands of subcontracted workers and health workers in every hospital in Istanbul and throughout Türkiye: workers' jobs, livelihoods and rights are not subject to tender. A campaign should be organized demanding the nationalization of healthcare services, as well as a substantial increase in resources. This should be part of a broader programme appealing to other sections of the working class.

The resistance at Çapa is part of a rising wave of class struggle in Türkiye. In recent months, many sections of the working class, above all the miners, have entered into battle for their unpaid wages and rights.

The march to Ankara by Doruk Mining workers in Eskişehir was followed by the struggle of Özden Mining workers in Edirne, who defied an armed attack by company thugs.

Workers at the Eti Gümü? mining company in Elaz?, led by the Independent Mine Workers' Union (Başms?z Maden-??), have now been protesting for four days over months of unpaid wages and compensation. The workers announced that if their wages are not paid, they will start a march to Ankara on July 24. In Giresun, workers at Nesko Mining, who have not received their wages since March, marched to the district centre following a protest at the mine site.

In Eskişehir on Tuesday, hundreds of workers at the Doruk Mining-owned Yunus Emre thermal power plant, and members of the Enerji-Sen union affiliated with the D?SK confederation began a march on Ankara over three months of unpaid wages. On Wednesday, the marchers were attacked by police with tear gas; union General President Süleyman Keskin, General Secretary Emin Ats?z and numerous workers were detained.

Private-sector teachers fighting for a base salary and employment rights, along with teachers victimized by the interview system, are continuing their protests in Ankara in defiance of police repression.

All these struggles, demonstrating the growing determination of the working class to resist, need to be

united around common demands against the ruling class and the government that represents it. Such a struggle requires a form of organization that transcends union and sectoral divisions. A rank-and-file committee established by the Çapa workers could connect with the miners, teachers, retirees condemned to destitution and the other workers entering into struggle, and take steps toward building a movement from below.

Speaking to the *Evrensel* newspaper, nightshift cook Metin Özgüro?lu explained that the workers had previously held protests demanding permanent positions for all workers at the hospital, and that while a portion of the cleaning and care workers were granted permanent status, refectory workers were excluded. Throughout this process, the Öz G?da-?? union, affiliated with the pro-government Hak-?? confederation, lined up against the workers.

The Çapa refectory workers are continuing their struggle by contacting G?da-??, affiliated with the "oppositional" D?SK. Whatever union the workers may belong to, control of the struggle must not belong to officials who negotiate behind closed doors, but to rank-and-file committees composed of representatives elected by the workers themselves, accountable to them and subject to recall at any moment. Only such committees can unite all workers in a common struggle, transcending union, sector, workplace, and country divisions.

Urgent demands such as permanent, secure, and decent wages for all, the abolition of the subcontracting system, and the nationalization of health services and other essential social services under the democratic control of the workers require a planned economy on a global scale, based not on capitalist profit but on the needs of society.



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