Turkish Independent Miners Union organiser Ba?aran Aksu on hunger strike in prison

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2 September 2026

Ba?aran Aksu, organising specialist of the Independent Miners Union (Ba??ms?z Maden-??), began an open-ended hunger strike on Tuesday, September 1, the seventh day of his imprisonment.

He was jailed on Wednesday, August 26 on the baseless charge of "inciting the public to hatred and hostility." The prosecutors are citing his social media posts.

Aksu is protesting the unlawful imprisonment of himself and the union's chairman, Gökay Çak?r, and demanding that he and Cakir be immediately released. This demand must be taken up by workers in every mine, factory and workplace in Türkiye and internationally, and they must be freed at once.

In announcing the hunger strike, Aksu wrote that, "The legitimate adversaries of a labor union are the bosses, the employers' organisations, the state and the government. If a union cannot criticise these structures, whose interests differ from those of the workers, and cannot raise its voice against them, then there is no need for it to exist." He added that the arrests were carried out "at the instigation and demand of holding company headquarters, employers' organisations and the yellow union lobbies."

Aksu has explained the reason for the hunger strike, stating:

> Together with workers, villagers, farmers, tradespeople and small producers who are in difficulty, weaving fraternity and struggle and declaring that we are not condemned to such a [social] order, in order to break the wheel of exploitation—based on impoverishing the people—of the international monopolies, the holding companies and their government, which are descending on the people's future, the only thing I can do in the prison where I am held is to point to the danger of hunger in every household and to share in it.

Reyhan Aksu, who visited her brother in prison, reported that Ba?aran Aksu has not been examined by a doctor a single time since entering prison and has not even been given vitamins. She said that, despite his health problems, he will continue the hunger strike until his demands are met, and that two prisoners held on ordinary criminal charges in the same ward have also begun a hunger strike in support of him.

Çak?r and Aksu were detained and jailed in the final stage of the struggle the miners were waging in Ankara for the unpaid wages, severance pay and social security contributions owed to workers at Eti Gümü? in Elaz?? and Doruk Madencilik in Eski?ehir, both owned by Y?ld?zlar SSS Holding. The detention order cited the suspects' "trade union positions" and their "capacity to direct and lead the masses" as grounds. While Aksu and Çak?r were in custody, it was announced that the miners' demands had been accepted.

The arrests provoked protests in Türkiye and internationally. The World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), which states that it represents more than 105 million workers in 133 countries and to which Ba??ms?z Maden-?? is affiliated, denounced the imprisonment of Çak?r and Aksu in an August 28 statement. It declared that the most basic trade union and democratic rights had been violated, and demanded the release of the two and the uninterrupted implementation of the freedom of association and protest.

The miners were held under police siege in the centre of the capital for 17 days and repeatedly taken into custody. Their wives were surrounded at a metro station. But neither the leadership of Türk-?? (1.2 million members) nor that of the D?SK (260,000 members) confederation, which presents itself as "oppositional," lifted a finger in their defense. Faced with the social anger generated by the arrests, D?SK Chairwoman Arzu Çerkezo?lu was compelled to issue a statement on August 27 on behalf of the D?SK Executive Board. But this statement, which was intended to defuse the reaction directed at the leadership from the ranks, only intensified it.

The statement, headed "Trade union struggle is not a crime," did not mention the names of Gökay Çak?r, Ba?aran Aksu or Ba??ms?z Maden-??. It made no reference to Y?ld?zlar SSS Holding. Although it spoke of pre-trial detention being turned into "an instrument of punishment and repression," and of the lengthy imprisonment of journalists, artists, mayors and politicians, it did not demand the release of the two trade unionists. Most importantly, the leadership of the 260,000-member D?SK confederation did not issue a single call for mass action.

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This statement provoked widespread anger on social media. What is involved here is not an “oversight” or an error of style. This stance is an open expression of the fact that D?SK and the other confederations objectively stand not alongside workers, but against them. The trade union apparatus is an extension of the state and the corporations, and its essential function is to suppress the class struggle. The D?SK leadership is hostile to the leaders of Ba??ms?z Maden-?? because of the role they play in the development of an independent workers’ movement and because they expose the apparatus.

The pressure from below strained the limits set by the confederation centre. On August 29, 16 unions (with 73,000 workers) affiliated to D?SK issued a separate, joint statement headed “Free Gökay Çak?r and Ba?aran Aksu!”, demanding the immediate release of the two unionists and an end to all measures of intimidation.

In response, the Sosyalist E?itlik Partisi – Dördüncü Enternasyonal (Socialist Equality Party – Fourth International) noted on X that this statement was not without significance and stated what actually had to be done:

> 73,000 workers and a broader mass must be mobilised behind the demand “freedom for working class prisoners”; declaring that “the jailing of workers’ leaders is an attack on the entire working class,” workers must use their industrial power.
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> As the Sosyalist E?itlik Partisi, we ask: will the signatory unions mobilise their members behind this demand and call on the rest of the working class to act as well? We repeat the call we made in our statement against the arrest of Gökay Çak?r and Ba?aran Aksu: “In every mine, factory and workplace, workers must respond by taking action independently of the union bureaucracies—which will merely stand by as Aksu and Çak?r are arrested—and by defending them.”

The broad opposition to the arrests also found expression in the petition against the imprisonment of Çak?r and Aksu that Ba??ms?z Maden-?? submitted to the court, with the signatures of more than 300 lawyers. In addition, the D?SK-affiliated Nakliyat-?? union held a solidarity action at a depot in Istanbul, and other solidarity actions were held in Istanbul, ?zmir, Gaziantep and Hopa in Artvin. Large numbers of miners’ wives defended Aksu and Çak?r in a video they released. The video stated: “If defending the rights of workers is a crime, then we defend that crime too. Ba?aran Aksu and Gökay Çak?r are innocent and we want them released.”

The jailing of Çak?r and Aksu is not an isolated incident. In March, B?RTEK-SEN Chairman Mehmet Türkmen was imprisoned for supporting the S?rma Hal? workers’ wildcat struggle in Gaziantep, and Esra I??k, a peasant leader who defends the Akbelen forest, was jailed for exercising her right to protest. In April, Ba?aran Aksu was jailed on the basis of a post defending I??k. In June, the workers of Öz?en Madencilik came under armed attack in front of the security forces. In July, ahead of the NATO summit, a de facto state of emergency was declared in Ankara and hundreds of people were arbitrarily detained. Many were jailed.

This mounting political repression expresses the response of President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an’s government to the growing resistance of the working class to austerity and social cuts. The intensifying class struggle is an expression of the irreconcilable conflict between the interests of the workers, who make up the overwhelming majority of the population, and those of a handful of capitalist oligarchs.

The same process—the effective abolition of the right to strike, the criminalisation of workers’ leaders, austerity imposed for the sake of war budgets and the corporations—is unfolding all over the world. Neither the trade union bureaucracies nor the establishment parties that defend the capitalist system have any answer to this crisis in the interests of the working class.

Workers must advance their own global solution to this crisis. In every mine, factory and workplace, workers must build rank-and-file committees independent of the trade union bureaucracies and use these committees to turn the demand for the release of Çak?r and Aksu and of all working-class prisoners into action. These committees, which will link workers’ struggles to one another, must be unified on an international scale under the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

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