

“Disposable apprentices”

Survey exposes dire conditions facing young and child workers in Türkiye

Y?lmaz Demirkol
22 September 2026

A survey published last week in the newspaper *Evrensel* is testimony to the brutal exploitation of children and young workers in Turkey.

Labour Youth conducted the survey in July and August among 530 young and child workers in industrial estates, textile workshops and working-class districts. It found that long working days, poverty wages, workplace accidents and exhaustion define the daily lives of these young people.

The participants range in age from 11 to 25. Their average age is 17, and 55 percent are not yet 18. Their main workplaces include automotive and metalworking repair and maintenance shops, as well as cafés, restaurants, and warehouses.

Two students from Vocational Training Centers (MESEM) who took part in the survey summed up the situation: “We are not treated like students but made to work like regular workers. The pay we get is absolutely not worth it. We are seen as low-wage ‘disposable apprentices.’”

These words expose the real content of the system that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government has expanded under the banner of “vocational education.”

Under MESEM, high school students spend four days a week at the workplace and only one day at school. It provides employers with cheap labor under a legal cover. “Student” or “apprentice” status provides the justification for low wages. Of those surveyed, 172 are MESEM students. The rest include vocational high school students, graduates and high school-age youth who have been pushed out of education. The problem is not limited to MESEM, but MESEM is an institutionalised form of youth labour exploitation.

Working conditions underscore the extent to which the rights won by the working class through great struggles, including for the eight-hour day, have come under attack. Of the participants, 275 work six days a week and 38 work seven days. For 44 percent, the working day lasts nine to 10 hours, and for roughly a quarter it lasts 11 to 12 hours. Some

report even longer working days. One 16-year-old MESEM student in the engine mechanics department said the demand was to work from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. That a 10-hour workday would be an improvement for this student shows how drastically expectations have been driven down.

Working longer does not mean earning more, either. While the official net monthly minimum wage is 28,075 lira, the average monthly wage of those working 41–50 hours a week is 25,747 lira, and that of those working 61–70 hours is just 26,848 lira. Sixty-nine percent of participants earn the minimum wage or less. As Karl Marx explained, the production of absolute surplus value through the prolongation of the working day forms the general groundwork of the capitalist system.

Fifty-five percent of participants have suffered at least one workplace accident. Reports by the Worker Health and Work Safety Council (İSG) document that dozens of children are killed in workplace homicides every year, MESEM students among them. According to İSG data, 33 child workers lost their lives on the job this summer alone.

Complaints of fatigue, sleeplessness and unhappiness stand out prominently in the survey. The words of one 15-year-old student—“I wish I could have stayed in school”—show that the constitutional right to education is an empty promise for a considerable number of working-class children. According to figures from the Turkish Statistical Institute reported by the newspaper *Nefes*, more than a third of Turkey’s 21.3 million children, or 7.8 million, live “at risk of poverty or social exclusion.” Among children aged 15 to 17, the labor force participation rate stands at 25.5 percent, or 980,000 children.

These conditions are the product of the capitalist oligarchy’s escalating assault on the social conditions and living standards of the working class. High inflation and a minimum wage held at poverty levels make children’s earnings a necessity for working-class families. Cheap youth labor, in turn, exerts downward pressure on the wages of all

workers.

This is an international phenomenon. According to the International Labour Organization and UNICEF, there were some 138 million child laborers worldwide in 2024, 54 million of them in hazardous work. At the same time, according to SIPRI, global military spending reached \$2.887 trillion in 2025. Turkey's military expenditure rose 7.2 percent to \$30 billion, amounting to a real increase of 94 percent since 2016. The social resources that could free children from work and guarantee them a high-quality public education, including proper nutrition, are being squandered on war preparations aimed at defending the reactionary interests of the ruling class.

Amid an escalation of imperialist aggression—from NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine to the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza and the US-Israeli war of aggression against Iran—capitalist governments are demanding sacrifices from workers. Young people are targeted by these policies both as cheap labor and as cannon fodder.

The survey is important in shedding light on the situation of child and young workers. But the program and policies of the Labour Party (EMEP), with which Labour Youth is affiliated, offer no way to put an end to these conditions, which stem from the capitalist profit system. On the contrary, EMEP, a Stalinist party, advances a perspective that channels the anger within the working class behind different factions of the ruling class. It does so on the basis of its pro-capitalist program of so-called “democratic people's power,” which rejects socialist revolution.

In the 2023 parliamentary elections, EMEP ran as part of the Labour and Freedom Alliance on the lists of the Kurdish nationalist Green Left Party (later renamed the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party, or DEM Party) and won two seats. In the presidential election held the same year, it backed Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the candidate of the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP), who waged a right-wing, pro-NATO, anti-worker and anti-migrant campaign.

Today, the DEM Party, together with the jailed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan, is collaborating with the Erdoğan government on the claim of bringing about “peace” and “democratization” on the Kurdish question. This is a government that is steadily abolishing basic democratic rights and implementing a ferocious program of social attacks against the working class on behalf of the capitalist oligarchy.

As part of this process, EMEP took part in the parliamentary commission set up for this purpose and voted in favor of the resulting law, even though it said the law produced “hostage politics.” EMEP deputy Şakir Bayhan declared: “What does the bill not contain? It

contains no democratization. It contains no democratic solution to the Kurdish question... It contains no steps toward the most basic democratic rights or lasting peace... Nevertheless, we are giving this support while also voicing our warnings, criticisms and objections.”

None of the parties that EMEP has allied with or supported opposes the capitalist system, which subjects the working class, children included, to ruthless exploitation and sends it to die in war. Directing workers to support Turkish or Kurdish nationalist bourgeois politicians means lending “left” support to the very order of capitalist exploitation they claim to criticize. It also means blocking the development of an independent revolutionary movement within the working class.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), affiliated with the Sosyalist Eşitlik Partisi – Dördüncü Enternasyonal (Socialist Equality Party–Fourth International) in Turkey, rejects this pro-capitalist nationalist perspective. It calls on students and young workers to unite with their class brothers and sisters in other countries and to fight for international socialism.

As inseparable demands of this struggle, the economic compulsion that drives children into work must be ended and child labor must be banned. The rights to education, nutrition, transportation and housing must be publicly guaranteed. MESEM must be abolished. Vocational training must cease to be a means of supplying companies with cheap labor and must instead be provided within a fully public-school system. The fight for these demands requires the unification of young workers, students, teachers and other working people, nationally and internationally, through rank-and-file committees independent of the trade union bureaucracies and the establishment parties.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact