

Dozens arrested ahead of the NATO summit in Türkiye remain in prison

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Ömer Aksu, a 17-year-old high school student, has been held in isolation for three months at the Kayseri Bünyan Closed Juvenile and Youth Prison. He is one of dozens of people unlawfully arrested ahead of the 36th NATO Summit, held in Ankara on July 7-8. Aksu was 16 at the time of his arrest. Last week, following a petition by 13 members of parliament, his case was brought before the Human Rights Inquiry Committee of the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye.

According to the petition, Aksu was detained on July 5. On July 8, the Konya 3rd Criminal Judgeship of Peace ordered his arrest on charges of “membership in an armed terrorist organization” and “organizational propaganda.” He was not placed in a regular ward. Instead, he is being held alone in isolation, in a section where the lights are left on 24 hours a day. His time in the open-air courtyard has been limited to an average of 30 minutes a day, and on weekends and some weekdays he is not let out at all.

In a letter sent through his lawyers, Aksu reported that there is no toilet or bathroom where he is held. Even for his most basic needs, he has to call the guards and ask for permission. Recently, his blood pressure suddenly spiked to 170–200, and he was rushed to hospital. Three months on, no indictment has yet been drawn up against him.

The “evidence” cited by the court consists of nothing more than stickers and leaflets found at his home and posts on social media. Aksu’s real “crime” is that he took part in the work of the Revolutionary Youth Associations (DGD), a legal association registered with the Interior Ministry. The DGD campaigns against the exploitation of child labour in the Vocational Education Centers (MESEM), where school-age children are put to work as apprentices, and for free school meals.

Aksu was arrested as part of a broad wave of repression stepped up by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government ahead of the NATO summit, at which it hosted the leaders of the imperialist powers and war criminals, above all US President Donald Trump.

The wave of operations began on the morning of June 12. In investigations based in Eskişehir and Zonguldak, simultaneous house raids were carried out in eight provinces, and 14 students who are members of the DGD were detained. On the same day,

in a separate investigation based in Diyarbakır, five members of the Socialist Party of the Oppressed (ESP) and the Federation of Socialist Youth Associations (SGDF) were detained.

On June 22, the Ankara Governor’s Office announced a 13-day ban, from June 28 to July 10, on all actions and activities in the city, including meetings, demonstrations, press statements, leafleting and the hanging of banners. The very next morning, June 23, after this decision amounting to a de facto state of emergency, simultaneous house raids began in many cities, above all in Ankara. Police broke down doors, and detainees were barred from seeing their lawyers.

According to a report on rights violations published on July 20 by Lawyers for Justice, at least 668 people were detained nationwide in the course of the summit. In a single investigation alone, 179 people were jailed pending trial and 34 were placed under house arrest. Subsequent operations brought the number of those jailed close to 220. Those detained included trade unionists, lawyers, academics, journalists, students and members of various left-wing parties.

The grounds for the arrests clearly expose the political character of the crackdown. According to lawyers and families, the authorities claimed that those arrested might organize “acts of civil disobedience similar to Gezi” during the summit, a reference to the mass Gezi Park protests of 2013.

The case files listed entirely legal activities as “evidence of crime”: trade union activity, taking part in protests against violence against women on November 25, writing on a wall, putting up a May Day sticker, entering and leaving a publishing house, and attending an anti-NATO meeting. As the lawyers pointed out, the files of those charged with “membership in an armed organization” did not contain a single armed act.

The most striking example is the case of the TEMA Foundation. Fourteen people from the foundation, which is known for its work combating soil erosion and planting trees, were arrested in the course of the crackdown on charges of “membership in an armed terrorist organization.” They included its Ankara representative, staff members and volunteers. The pretext was that, during a nature trip to Nallıhan on June 3, an action unconnected to the foundation took place near the spot where they had stopped for a break.

The volunteers, among them a 75-year-old retired teacher, were released piecemeal. The last of them were freed only on July 22.

The releases accelerated after the summit ended. According to press reports, at least 114 “NATO prisoners” were still behind bars on August 11. By mid-September, this number had fallen to 77, and by the end of September to around 55.

The fact that three quarters of those arrested were released within two-and-a-half months of the summit points to only one conclusion: these unlawful “preventive” arrests were based not on concrete evidence of any crime, but on the summit calendar. The aim was to keep anti-war opposition off the streets for the duration of the summit and to intimidate broader masses of workers and youth.

Among those still in custody is Caner Y?ld?r?m, a special education teacher and a member of the rank-and-file Private Sector Teachers Union. Despite an official medical report documenting a life-threatening insect allergy, Y?ld?r?m was held for more than 40 days at the Konya Type E Closed Prison in a single-person cell with no access to an open-air courtyard and infested with insects. The prison justified this on the grounds that “there is no suitable ward for political prisoners.”

In a letter, Y?ld?r?m wrote that he spent 23 hours and 40 minutes a day in this cell, which he described as “four steps” long. Although the prison administration approved his transfer, the Justice Ministry took no action. Only after his union and several members of parliament raised the issue publicly was Y?ld?r?m moved to a clean observation room. He nevertheless remains in detention.

Dursun Gökta?, who was arrested while undergoing treatment for breast cancer, was still waiting in prison for biopsy results as of the end of September.

The wave of detentions and arrests was a preventive crackdown designed to show that opposition to NATO and war would be met with a violent assault. The NATO summit took place as the Erdo?an government was binding Türkiye ever more tightly to NATO’s war plans. It set in motion the target adopted in The Hague last year of raising military spending to 5 percent of GDP, at the expense of social spending, and it escalated imperialist aggression.

In the aftermath of the summit, mounting threats against Russia, above all by the European powers over Kaliningrad, prompted Moscow to warn of the danger of a nuclear conflict.

In Türkiye, popular opposition to the United States, NATO and Israel, which they back, is extremely strong. According to a survey published by Areda Survey in March, 93 percent of respondents said they opposed the US-Israeli attack on Iran. The government’s wave of repression before the summit aimed to prevent this mass opposition from erupting against the rolling out of the red carpet in Ankara for the powers that made the genocide in Gaza possible and that are waging a war of aggression against Iran.

The imperialist powers made no secret of their satisfaction.

Trump declared that he was attending the summit “out of respect for Erdo?an” and heaped praise on him. Far from saying anything about the dictatorial measures in Türkiye, the American and European imperialist “democracies” are increasingly applying such measures in their own countries.

In France, according to Justice Ministry figures, 6,877 people have been detained in the high school protests that began on September 17, and 86 percent of them are minors. In Europe, opponents of the Gaza genocide are being slandered as antisemites and face police repression and prosecution. In the United States, the Trump administration is escalating its crackdown on immigrants. As part of this fascistic repression, federal agents raided the home of Democratic Congresswoman Ilhan Omar, a Somali-born Muslim US citizen, on Monday.

The most important case in the suppression of socialist opposition to war is in Ukraine. On August 10, Bogdan Syrotiuk, the 27-year-old founder and leader of the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists, was sentenced to 15 years in prison by the Pervomaisk City District Court on charges of “high treason under martial law.” The basis for the conviction was six articles written by Bogdan published on the *World Socialist Web Site*. In them, he called for the unity of Ukrainian and Russian workers against the war being waged in Ukraine between NATO and Russia. The case file contains not a shred of evidence of espionage, sabotage or the passing of military information. While Bogdan’s lawyers appeal the verdict, the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Parties are continuing a global campaign for Bogdan’s immediate release.

Bogdan and those arrested in Ankara for opposing NATO are targets of the same turn toward imperialist war, dictatorship and social counterrevolution. The same crisis of the capitalist system is also producing growing resistance among workers and youth to this ruling-class offensive, as seen in the mass movement developing in France and across Europe. This mass opposition must be mobilized in defense of political prisoners in Türkiye, in Ukraine and around the world, and in the struggle against imperialist war.



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