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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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12.07.2021

Thousands of Turkish electricity workers launch wildcat strike wave

Thousands of energy workers in cities across Turkey are going on wildcat strikes against misery contracts imposed on them amid the social crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

After the April 30 action, when 2,000 Bedaş electricity workers in Istanbul launched a wildcat strike defying a strike ban, now thousands of electricity workers in Istanbul, Ankara, Adana and Zonguldak have spontaneously walked off the job. They are protesting sell-out contracts made by the Tes-İş union affiliated to the Türk-İş union federation.



Electrical workers stopped work and held a sit-in protest in Adana [Credit: @bedaiscileri on Twitter]

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In recent days, electricity workers held mass protests in various cities, inspired by the Bedaş workers, against the union's attempt to hide plans for a sellout contract from them. Energy workers generally earn near to minimum wage, i.e., a little over 3,000 Turkish liras (US\$350).

The union announced its fourth meeting for collective bargaining with the EnerjiSA company on June 29 in the Istanbul (Ayedaş), Ankara (Başkent) and Adana (Toroslar) branches. It said it had received the employer's offer and agreed to negotiate as soon as possible.

Ayedaş workers in Istanbul, who did not accept the company's offer, gathered in front of the Sabancı Holding Headquarters, EnerjiSA's parent company, defying objections from the Tes-İş union. Sabancı Holding, one of Turkey's largest private conglomerates, has purchased privatized energy distribution operations in many cities.

On Thursday, the workers gathered in front of EnerjiSA's Maltepe, Istanbul, office with a banner reading, "We do not accept this slavery contract. We want a living wage." They noted that while EnerjiSA CEO Murat Pınar reported that the company "grew by 48 percent in the first six months of 2021," their raise was below the official rate of inflation. Union officials who tried to speak to the workers were booed.

Energy workers also mobilised in the capital, Ankara. After it was announced that the union had reached an agreement "in principle" behind the workers' backs, workers protested in front of Tes-İş headquarters on July 7. The workers staged a sit-in, briefly turning their backs on the union headquarters, then entered the union building, chanting, "Union management should resign!" The union management was booed, and the protest continued into the evening hours.

A worker told the press: "There has been a 122 percent hike in electric bills, but our union is demanding a 9 percent [for the first six months] and 5 percent [for the second six months] increase. I almost died in this job." Another worker added, "I have lost three coworkers since 2008."

Yesterday morning, the workers gathered and stopped work, chanting, "We don't want an increase in misery." Terrified by the workers' militant stance, union officials tried to get

workers back to work, but this failed. Workers protested horrific workplace safety records and repeated workplace deaths. One said, “We should die one day, not every day.”

In Zonguldak, on the western Black Sea coast, electricity workers went on a wildcat strike yesterday morning after protesting against terrible conditions and the union’s cooperation with EnerjiSA on Wednesday. The workers expressed their determination to struggle, chanting a slogan: “This is just a beginning, more will come.”

Protests and strikes also spread to Adana, where NATO’s Incirlik Air Base is located. On Wednesday and Thursday, hundreds of workers protested the union and shouted slogans after Tes-İş signed a sellout contract for a 9 percent raise for the first six months and a 6 percent raise for the second.

Workers chanted, “We don’t want such a union.” One worker told the press, “We work for hours in very hot weather. Everything gets a raise. Our wages have just melted. We have been waiting for this contract for two years. The real inflation rate is around 30 percent. We are given a 9 percent, and then a 6 percent wage increase. With this contract, our labor and sweat have been sold.”

While union leaders tried to appease the workers, claiming that “there will be a renegotiation, the contract has not been signed yet,” police came to threaten the workers in front of the Tes-İş Adana Branch. Yesterday morning, after an hour of booing and protesting the union, workers stopped work, pledging not to go back to work until their demands were met. A worker declared, “I will not be silent any more. Enough is enough!”

On Thursday, Süleyman Keskin, chairman of the rival Enerji-Sen union from the Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions of Turkey (DİSK), told Yol TV: “Our colleagues are uncomfortable with collective bargaining agreements conducted behind closed doors, and a contract process in which their approval is not obtained.” However, Keskin was silent on the fact that DİSK also negotiates contracts and cooperates with companies behind closed doors, and that anger is mounting among workers in many industries against DİSK, as well.

This April, the Bedaş workers’ struggle in Istanbul came to a dead end due to pressure to support another union, namely, Enerji-Sen. Today, Bedaş workers are calling for joint

action with workers in other cities in their social media group, but their new union, Enerji-Sen, is silent. Strictly adhering to the legal ban on strikes in the energy sector, the only thing it does is organize ineffective, symbolic actions outside of working hours to restrain workers' militancy.

The energy workers' rebellion against the unions, defying the strike ban, is part of an international upsurge of the class struggle. While the ruling class has massively enriched itself around the world during the pandemic, with a criminal "profits before lives" policy, social attacks have mounted against the living conditions of the working class, alongside mass deaths and infections.

While the unions undertake to defeat the workers in the service of the ruling class and state, workers' anger against this reactionary collaboration is growing. Workers are increasingly engaged in struggles to reject the conditions imposed on them and seek a way forward.

US Volvo workers twice overwhelmingly rejected a contract imposed by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union and formed their own rank-and-file committee, setting an international example. Volvo workers in Ghent, Belgium, also walked out on Thursday, protesting the union's support for extending weekly working hours.

In Turkey, Bedaş workers recently downed their tools, again defying the strike ban. TPI Composite workers who opposed a sellout contract signed by the union were fired from their jobs. Miners from Soma, who have not received their severance pay for years, recently tried to go to Ankara, but police blocked them from entering the city. On their way back, Tahir Çetin, chairman of the Independent Mining Workers' Union, and miner Ali Faik Inter lost their lives in a traffic accident reportedly due to exhaustion, increasing workers' anger.

Lifting the ban on strikes, improving living and working conditions and achieving a real increase in wages cannot be achieved by unions that have become an extension of the companies and the capitalist state. Nor is it possible based on the nationally based program that the unions and their pseudo-left supporters advance.

The way forward for energy workers is to build their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, joining the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees called for by the International Committee of the Fourth International, to coordinate their struggle with their class brothers in Turkey and around the world.

This struggle is to organize a much broader international counteroffensive of the working class with a socialist program aimed at the nationalization of key sectors such as energy and the establishment of workers' power as part of the fight for global socialism.

World Socialist 11.07.2021