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Mass May Day demonstrations in Turkey ahead of national elections

Hundreds of thousands of workers and youth took part in demonstrations across Turkey yesterday for May Day, the international day of unity and struggle of the working class. While tens of thousands of people gathered in Maltepe Square in Istanbul, dozens who wanted to demonstrate in Taksim, the historic May Day square, were violently attacked and arrested by police.



Protesters chant slogans as they demonstrate on May Day in Istanbul, Turkey, Monday, May 1, 2023 [AP Photo/Khalil Hamra]

Mass May Day demonstrations were held in Turkey's capital, Ankara, Izmir, Bursa and other major cities, including Diyarbakır, Konya, Kayseri, Artvin, Samsun, Yalova, Zonguldak, and Eskişehir. Turkey's largest trade union confederation, the pro-government

Türk-İş, with 1.2 million members, organised a rally in Adana which around 6,000 workers joined.

In Hatay and Gaziantep, hit by the February 6 earthquake in Turkey and Syria that officially killed over 50,000 people in Turkey and displaced millions, workers also celebrated May Day. They expressed their anger against the capitalist system and the entire political establishment, especially the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which are behind this great social catastrophe.

On Twitter, Erdoğan said, “We have always tried to give you [workers] your rights. We declared May Day, which was used as an exploitation material for years, as a holiday for you, and made it a real Labor Day.” Then he asked for votes in the presidential and parliamentary elections to be held on May 14, stating: “I rely on the support of you, my fellow workers.”

In fact, Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), which came to power in 2002, had the policy of banning May Day and abolishing it as a public holiday after the NATO-backed military coup in 1980.

However, in the face of growing mass demonstrations, especially since 2007, demanding both the opening of the historic Taksim Square for May Day demonstrations and an official holiday on May 1, Erdoğan was forced to declare it an official holiday again in 2009.

In 1977, at the “Bloody May Day” in Taksim Square, more than 30 people were killed and hundreds were injured by automatic rifle fire; the shooters were never charged. Taksim Square, where hundreds of thousands of people celebrated May Day between 2010 and 2013, has been arbitrarily and undemocratically closed to workers’ demonstrations since 2013.

Despite Erdoğan’s demagogic statements about workers, the working class is struggling with unprecedented inflation and relentless impoverishment. The real annual inflation is over 110 percent, and an estimated 90 percent of the population lives below the poverty line.

Erdoğan has presided over a massive transfer of wealth from the working class to finance capital during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a preventable excess death toll of over 300,000 people in Turkey. The total net profit of the Turkish banking sector increased by 366 percent in 2022. In contrast, the share of labor in the national income decreased from 32 percent in 2016 to 23.7 percent in 2022—even lower than in 2002.

A distinctive feature of the demonstrations in Turkey was the contradiction between the growing militancy of masses of workers and youth, and the efforts of union officials and pseudo-left groups leading the marches to channel this militancy into a dead end.

At the main May Day rally held in Maltepe, Istanbul, by the leadership of the DİSK and KESK confederations, they tried to channel the anger of the broad masses of workers against the Erdoğan government behind the bourgeois opposition in the May 14 elections. The aim of this reactionary policy is to keep the workers within the framework of the capitalist system.

The NATO war with Russia in Ukraine, which continues to escalate, and poses the most urgent threat of nuclear war to the international working class, was not raised by either the union bureaucracies or the pseudo-left parties. But only a month has passed since the Turkish parliament voted on Finland's membership in NATO, marking a significant escalation in NATO's war against Russia.

However, by working to promote Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the candidate of the Nation Alliance, Erdoğan's rival in the presidential election, they tried to avoid offending their bourgeois allies. Indeed, all parties of both Erdoğan's People's Alliance and the Nation Alliance confirmed their loyalty to imperialism by unanimously supporting Finland's NATO membership.

The Kurdish nationalist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) did not participate in the vote, but echoed NATO's rhetoric, stating that Finland's "security concerns are legitimate." The pseudo-left Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP), which, with its ally the HDP, stands behind the Nation Alliance, also did not participate in the vote—making clear that it is not an anti-imperialist or socialist party.

"This May Day will be the last May Day we celebrate under the rule of the enemies of the workers," declared TİP Chairman Erkan Baş in his speech at the Maltepe rally. He continued: "Only 13 days later, tens of thousands of people gathered here will write a note in history: There was a cruel government in this country that oppressed its people, leaving them hungry and impoverished; we will say that this government 'no longer exists.'"

This statement of Baş is a political lie. In fact, capitalism and bourgeois rule in Turkey will not end if Kılıçdaroğlu, another right-wing and pro-NATO representative of the bourgeoisie, becomes president instead of the Erdoğan, or if Erdoğan loses his majority in the parliament. Until the working class takes power through a socialist revolution, May Day will be celebrated "under the rule of the enemies of the workers" in Turkey and internationally.

DİSK Chairwoman Arzu Çerkezoğlu similarly focused on directing opposition within the working class and youth behind the bourgeois Nation Alliance. “We will be side by side, shoulder to shoulder on May 14th, where we will choose between evil and good, between lies and truth, between shamelessness and humility, between theft and the sweat of our brow,” she declared, before adding: “And we will get rid of this evil order together.”

Kılıçdaroğlu, whom the TİP and DİSK support as an “alternative” to Erdoğan, spoke in Zonguldak yesterday, once again revealing what a right-wing government he is preparing to form.

Kılıçdaroğlu has long tried to deflect growing social opposition into a reactionary, anti-Syrian direction. Yesterday he again targeted refugees, the most vulnerable section of the working class, stating: “We have 3.6 million Syrians. With your votes, God willing, I will send all our Syrian brothers and sisters to their home countries within two years at the latest.” He added, “They say Mr. Kemal is not a nationalist. Who loves his homeland? Mr. Kemal. Who wants to send foreigners back? Mr. Kemal.”

In reality, Turkish or Kurdish workers in Turkey have no problem with Syrians, Afghans or other refugee and migrant workers. Syrian and Afghan working people, victims of the bloody military interventions of the NATO powers, including Turkey, are subjected to the unbridled exploitation of the capitalists in Turkey. At the same time they are scapegoated for social problems stemming from the capitalist system.

Which ever right-wing faction of the ruling class wins the May 14 elections, the fundamental problems rooted in global capitalism will be exacerbated, not resolved. The urgent task facing the working class is to establish its political independence from all factions of the bourgeoisie and the union bureaucracies.

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