

The Tekel Strike in Turkey

The “Sakarya Commune” Wins the First Round!

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The strike of Turkish workers across the winter of 2009-10 at Tekel, a former state enterprise in the tobacco and alcoholic beverage sector, has attracted the attention of the left and unions around the world. The Tekel workers have demonstrated incredible tenacity and courage in confronting layoffs, flexibilization, and remuneration cuts that have been the result – as well as the intent – of the privatization process. The strike has animated the Turkish union movement, and given renewed impetus to the class struggle in Turkey.

Although the struggle has many features specific to the Turkish context, it has gained wider resonance for the union movement internationally. Struggles over public sector austerity and restructuring are moving to the centre of the political stage as ‘exit strategies’ from the financial crisis begin to set in. Indeed, these conflicts have already burst onto the streets of Athens, Dublin, Lisbon and San Francisco. And they will continue to spread over the coming year. Workers and the left around the world can draw inspiration from the Tekel workers’ struggle. The Bulletin here presents two reports, from Sungur Savran and Gülden Özcan, on the current phase of the Tekel strike.

After 78 days of resolute and militant fighting, the heroic battle of the Tekel workers of Turkey has now entered a new phase. At the end of January, the government issued a decree that involved some minor improvements to the new employment status of the workers, giving them a month to make the transition to this new status or to lose their jobs all together. The workers and their union refused this new offer, since the casual nature of the employment status remained despite the improvements (the workers could be sacked at the end of 11 months of employment in their new jobs.) On March 1st, the penultimate day before the term recognised by the government expired, the Council of State, a high court in the French tradition that oversees administrative decisions, decided to stay the execution of the government decree, on the grounds that the 30-day period given by the government to make the choice was “unnecessarily restrictive.”

Squeezed between the alternatives of having to accept a status against which they had been fighting for more than two and a half months and joblessness in a country where the official unemployment rate is 14%, with real figures reaching up to 20%, and threatened by the government with eviction from the tents that they had set up in the heart of Ankara, the capital city, the workers rejoiced at having gained a reprieve of unspecified length to carry on their fight. The union they belong to decided that, after 78 days in Ankara, the workers would go back to their home towns to return to Ankara on April 1st to start the struggle anew. So we have entered a new stage that is extremely critical for the future of this fight, which has given an electrifying impetus to class struggle in Turkey.

The Background

Before assessing the present situation and the prospects for the future, it would be in order to summarize the events that unfolded within the last three months so as to give the reader a taste of the significance of this struggle. As we have [earlier written](#), Tekel is a former state economic enterprise of tobacco and alcoholic beverages that was privatized in early 2008 despite the militant struggle of the workers against privatization. The tobacco factories were sold to British American Tobacco, which sacked 12,000 of the workers and closed down the many factories around the country except one, thus making it clear that its real purpose was to conquer the large domestic market of Turkey. The government proposed these workers jobs in other public sector establishments paying roughly half their earlier wages, but more importantly with no job security or social rights. The workers revolted against this, organising on 15 December 2009 a march on Ankara from 21 provinces of the country. Having survived the ferocious attack of the police on the fourth day of their action in Ankara, the workers spent the next four weeks in front of the building of the trade-union confederation to which their union is affiliated, Turk-Is, carrying out protests and impromptu small demonstrations. Having gained the support of broad sectors of the working class and society at large and having voted unanimously to continue their struggle, the workers forced the Turk-Is bureaucracy to take action, one-hour work stoppages all around the country and a big demonstration in Ankara on January 17th, during which they invaded the podium to call for a general strike (not a legally recognised right in Turkish legislation).

When the negotiations between the government and Turk-Is stalled, the bureaucracy was forced, under the pressure of the force of the workers' action, to decide, together with other workers' and public employees' confederations, on a one-day "solidarity strike" - a general strike in disguise, on February 4th. However, not one single confederation, including the left-wing DISK and KESK, moved a finger to really organise the general strike, so this turned out to be one only in name. There were sporadically workplaces that did spontaneously stop work on that day, but the real action was on the streets. In all the 81 provincial capitals of Turkey, as well as many small towns, there were demonstrations, more than a hundred thousand workers all in all coming out on the streets in support of the Tekel workers. This show of solidarity, despite the machinations of the bureaucracy, forced the government to step back and concede the improvements mentioned above, which nonetheless fell far short of the major demand of the workers, i.e. job security.

The "Sakarya Commune"

In the meanwhile, after the January 17th demonstration, the workers gradually set up tents in the neighbourhood, called Sakarya, in which the Turk-Is headquarters is located. This soon became a full-fledged "tent city," sprawling across several streets in the heart of Ankara. The workers held night vigils in these tents, taking turns to sleep on makeshift beds, discussing among themselves and with their visitors, mostly organised and unorganised socialists, other workers and labourers, and people from all walks of life. Mornings were quieter as many workers rested in those hours. And in the afternoons and evenings there was constant action, torchlight marches etc. There was incessant political debate. The tent city in Sakarya turned into a Mecca for all kinds of opposition movements and created an immense impetus for an awakening of class consciousness in all, Tekel workers and visitors alike. Everything was shared, from food to beds to ideas. Socialists, ostracised and marginalised by state and society alike since the military coup of 1980, moved like fish in the sea among the workers. A majority of the Tekel workers, most of whom had been rabidly

anti-communist up until recently, embraced the support extended to them by socialist parties and groups, avidly discussed socialist ideas with them and rapidly moved away from the mainstream parties they had supported in the past.

Furthermore, the barriers created by the prejudice of the Turkish workers toward the Kurds (looked upon as “terrorists” and “separatists”) was overcome to a great extent. In the heat of the common fight the Turkish workers embraced their Kurdish comrades and cast away their hostility. Another important element was the presence in Ankara of a considerable contingent of women workers. For families with a conservative way of life, where even women who work outside the home are subjugated to strict control by their husbands and male kin, the sight of women workers from provincial cities spending the night sleeping in beds in shared tents was amazing, even heroic.

The prospect of the Turkish government and the usually brutal Turkish police tolerating a “transgression” like the Sakarya “tent city” would have been unimaginable but for the resolve and the tenacity of the Tekel workers. Such was the force and legitimacy of the struggle that the government did not dare to order the evacuation of the area – which would have been, militarily speaking, an easy task for the police, given the docility of the union bureaucracy. This, then, is what I would call the “Sakarya Commune,” a space of freedom and revolt that lasted for 40 days in the form of a “tent city” and for 78 days in all.

The Reprieve

The period between that caricature of a general strike on February 4th and the beginning of March passed with the manoeuvres of the union bureaucracy to bide their time so that the Tekel workers, exhausted and in desperation, would accept defeat. There was one last big action on February 20th, when professional unionists and shop stewards from around the country, joined spontaneously by many ordinary workers and Tekel supporters, numbering some 30,000, descended on Ankara to spend the night in the “tent city.” Then came the decision of the confederations to stage “another” general strike... scheduled for May 26th! When this decision was announced to Tekel workers, one yelled “2010 or 2011?”

The decision of the Council of the State was partially a product of what we call the “political civil war of the bourgeoisie,” pitting the government against the army and the high courts, the two sides obliquely representing the two fractions of the Turkish bourgeoisie, the well-entrenched Westernist-secular fraction and the rising Islamist one. This has confirmed our prognosis that, were the working-class movement to take bold steps in this conjuncture, the breach between the two wings of the bourgeoisie would give it tremendous room for manoeuvre. However, the court’s decision was also the product of the tremendous popularity and legitimacy of the movement itself and may, in this sense, be considered a partial victory. Round one goes, globally speaking, to the workers, who have returned home unvanquished.

However, this opens a very difficult period. The power of the struggle mainly sprang from the force of the collective unity of thousands of workers from all around the country, men and women, Turks and Kurds, occupying, in a certain sense, the heart of the capital. Back in their home towns, no one will hear of them and there is no overall plan of action for the month of March. This is bound to bring the workers back to a psychology of normalcy from the heights of the excitement of successful and tenacious struggle. The union bureaucracy, now including the workers’ own union, which formerly adopted a much more militant stance than the confederations, seems to be bent on putting an end to the movement.

So the days ahead are full of dangers. But the Tekel workers have surprised everyone so much at previous downturns of the struggle that it is too early to predict a petering out of the movement. Hence April 1st, when the workers return to Ankara, may hold in store a pleasant surprise once again.

Whatever the final outcome of the struggle, though, the Tekel fight has already made history by the immensely militant and resolved spirit of the workers in this age that has so often been dubbed post-modern, by their original and creative modes of action and by the repeated challenge they levelled at the union bureaucracy. It has shown once again that workers learn and gain class consciousness in and through action. It has shown the way forward to the fraternity of the Turkish and Kurdish peoples. Finally, it has also awakened broad layers of the working masses to class consciousness, masses who in effect share the same burden of joblessness, contingent work, low wages and privatizations. These have earned it a well-deserved place in the annals of the class struggle, both in Turkey and internationally. •

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