



# May Day in Istanbul: Tear gas and robocops prevent rally in Taksim Square

Thu, 08/05/2008 - 19:04

On May Day Taksim Square, Istanbul's largest and 20,000 police, many of them in full riot gear, occupied a major tourist and shopping centre.

Its centre was surrounded with metal barriers and neighbouring Taksim Gezi Park was turned into a military camp filled with soldiers awaiting orders. Holding May Day rallies in Taksim has a highly symbolic meaning for militant trade unionists and the revolutionary left. It was the location for international workers day celebrations before the 1980 military coup. On the 1st of May 1977 500,000 people packed the square when police snipers opened from the rooftops, killing five demonstrators and armoured police vehicles were driven full force into the crowds producing a panic in which 29 died. So when the militant trade unions and the left announced they would end their marches in the square a confrontation with the state forces was likely. May Day meetings have been invariably banned from 1978 onwards and 2008 was no exception. The Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP), for all its reformist expressions of concern for the poor and exploited, has, in power since April 2003, proved itself a typical neoliberal capitalist government. May Day also exposed the emptiness of its claims to be a democratic party. AKP Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan threatened workers with the chilling words "If the feet try to rule the head, this will lead to Armageddon." And the huge deployment of police with water cannon and highly toxic tear gas, showed him to be as good as his word. So savage was the repression that all the Turkish press and TV stations, except the Islamist ones, vehemently condemned the brutality of the police.

In the early morning, around 6.30 a.m. police attacked the Istanbul headquarters of DISK, the Confederation of Revolutionary Workers' Unions, in Şişli district firing dozens of gas grenades into the building and turning pressurized water cannon on some 20,000 union members who had gathered there to prepare the May Day marches. This assault on the union headquarters was repeated five more times in the course of the day, leaving it wrecked. Süleyman Çelebi, president of DİSK and İsmail Hakkı Tombul, president of KESK, the Confederation of Public Sector Trade Unions, tried to negotiate an end to the police attacks but in vain. "Istanbul is a giant prison now," he said.

"These events show how far this country is from democracy," said Ferhat Tuna, a well-known protest music artist. "In the [DISK] building, I for one moment thought they were going to burn us down. The people should see that the AKP has never been a party that supports democracy." Later in the morning, the police fired gas grenades into the Şişli Etfal Hospital. Patients, including elderly people, desperately tried to flee the thick engulfing fog of poisonous fumes. As well as militant trade unionists, the various Turkish and Kurdish CP's and their front organisations, played a major part in the attempt to march to Taksim Square. Various attempts were made to get into the square all met by ferocious gassing. Even when protestors tried to leave the area they were tear-gassed again. In all between 500 (the police figure) and 900 (the trade union's estimate) were arrested though far left sources give much higher figures. The Kurdish participation to the 1st of May was also a notable feature. PKK made the call for all the Kurds to participate in the 1st of May meetings. May Day was celebrated all over Kurdistan. In Diyarbakir, where the government tried to ban the demonstration, tens of thousands of Kurdish workers attended the rally.