Turkey?s Tekel workers fight on

Marcus Halaby Fri, 05/03/2010 - 11:34
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The struggle has reached fever pitch in Turkey, with a million workers across 82 provinces joining a one-day general strike in defence of 12,000 former Tekel workers. An indefinite general strike has now been called for 26 May.

Tekel was a state owned tobacco monopoly, until it was sold off to British American Tobacco (BAT) in 2008. Workers made redundant from privatised firms are allowed to transfer elsewhere in the state sector.
But there?s a cruel catch; they are put on short time, lower wages and are not entitled to benefits.
This is a disguised form of unemployment, with workers having to work for their dole. And it is against this that the now-dispersed Tekel workers have been on strike since last year.

Meanwhile, to rub salt into their wounds, BAT has reported a 10 per cent hike in profits to £2.7 billion, aided by ?emerging markets? acquisitions like Tekel.

The government is also inflaming the situation, with prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan claiming: ?After privatization they are just taking their salaries, and this is the public?s money. I am sorry, but I will not let anyone take away the rights of this country?s orphans.?

But in Turkey, as in other countries, the problems stem not from the millions of workers, but from their leaders. There is a serious danger that the movement could lose momentum.

The fact that workers had to storm the headquarters of their union federation to force its leaders to call a one-day general strike should be a warning.