



# Turkey: Tekel workers in crucial battle with state

Marcus Halaby Fri, 29/01/2010 - 19:49

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Thousands of workers in the alcohol and tobacco industry are in a major struggle. Marcus Hallaby reports

Twelve thousand sacked workers at Tekel, Turkey's former alcohol and tobacco monopoly have been on strike since 14 December. Up to a hundred and forty of them have been on hunger strike, five of whom have already been taken to hospital.

They are demanding their transfer to jobs in other state enterprises, and the protection of wages and benefits that they enjoyed prior to factory closures imposed after the sale of the Turkish industry to British-American Tobacco.

This struggle has placed them in direct conflict with the Article 4/C policy of the Islamist government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. This allows workers dismissed from privatised firms to be transferred back into to the state sector - at the expense of their wage levels, job security, health benefits and overtime pay.

Additionally, workers employed under this policy may only work between 3 and 10 months of the year, receiving no wages or social security benefits when they are not working, and being forbidden to take other jobs when not being deployed.

Vicious attack from bosses

The Tekel workers affected by this can expect to see their wages reduced almost in half. The desperate urgency of this struggle can be seen in the comments of one of the hunger strikers, who pointed out that his children would be better off on the pension they would receive if he died, than on the miserly and irregular wages he would earn if he lived.

Their struggle has also placed them in direct and open conflict with the trade union leaders. On 17 January, a demonstration in the capital Ankara of 100,000 people (including other workers and leftist organisations) saw Tekel workers seize the building of their union federation, Türk-Is, and demand that its president Mustafa Kumlu, either resign or call a general strike for 26 January.

The union officials were only able to restore control by threatening the protestors with police violence - the police making use of their right to disperse the crowd once the 'official' demonstration had been declared over.

## National strike

What is significant about this struggle is that it involves workers from across the whole of Turkey, with 43 workplaces in 21 cities. In particular, Tekel's workers come both from the tobacco-growing regions of Turkish Kurdistan in the east, and from the ethnic Turkish-dominated western half of the country.

A vote called early in January on whether to continue the strike saw an overwhelming majority in favour, with unanimity amongst those in Ankara, and a 99.6 per cent vote in favour in the provinces. Public sector strikes are illegal in Turkey, but their determined action has inspired others (including railway workers and firefighters) already mired in disputes that had seen them attacked with tear gas, water cannons and police batons.

The militancy of the Kurdish workers in particular have helped transform the previously chauvinist attitudes of many Turkish workers, with comments being made that 'if it was not for the Kurds, we could not have come this far'. This is

especially important, given the government's subtle incitements against the Kurds as its social peace crumbles and as its attempts to placate Kurdish aspirations have reached their narrow limits.

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