



Turkey: workers unite against crisis ? May Day in Taksim Square at last

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The pressure from trade unionists and left activists wanting to march on May Day, forcing the government to legalise the event shows an upsurge in militancy says Peter Main

For the first time since 1978, workers succeeded in celebrating May Day in Istanbul's huge Taksim Square. More than 200,000 marched under the banners of six trade union federations. The demonstration is powerful evidence of a revival of the Turkish and Kurdish workers' militancy in response to the economic crisis.

This revival was sparked by the Tekel workers' epic struggle to resist the destruction of jobs and livelihoods.

On 15 December 12,000 workers lost their jobs when Tekel, previously the state monopoly on tobacco and liquor, was sold off to British American Tobacco. Their strike brought together workers across the whole of the country, from the tobacco-producing districts of Turkish Kurdistan to the Aegean coast. These workers have taken on not only the government and the courts but also their own trade union leaders. Their union, Tek Gida-Is, is part of the pro-government Turk-Is Confederation whose leader is Mustafa Kumlu.

Tekel workers have used hunger strikes, occupied a public park in Ankara, besieged and then occupied the union headquarters, and forced Turk-Is to call a solidarity general strike in February. These actions won the admiration and support of workers across the country. Crucially, the strike brought together Turkish and Kurdish workers in a display of solidarity that has done much to overcome divisions carefully nurtured by the state for decades. The legal representative of the Kurdish movement, in effect the largest opposition movement in Turkey, also called for mass participation in May Day under the slogan "Turkish and Kurdish workers unite!"

But immediately after the strikers won a significant concession from the courts which annulled a government order to conclude the dispute within 30 days, Kumlu ordered the dismantling of the 'tent city' in Ankara that was the nerve centre of the strike.

This set back the workers' momentu - but it also undermined Kumlu's prestige. He was shouted down and had to be bundled away from the podium by the police for his own safety!

Historical Victory - Taking Taksim Square

In 1977, Taksim Square was the scene of a police massacre in which 37 demonstrators died. In 1978 the government banned all further demonstrations. This year, photographs of those who died took pride of place on the demonstration.

For the last four years, Taksim Square has seen repeated attempts by socialist and workers' organisations, in particular the Revolutionary Workers' Unions Confederation, DISK, to commemorate the victims of the massacre and to celebrate May Day. On each occasion, they have been bloodily dispersed by riot police. The decision by the Governor of Istanbul to authorise demonstrations marks an important victory for the left. This is not just a change of heart but recognition of the increasing impact of the left in the workers' movement.

This year, although the DISK contingent was by far the biggest, the demonstration was joined by the largest of the trade

union confederations in Turkey, Turk-Is, which is aligned to the ruling Justice and Development Party, as well as Hak-Is, the conservative, religious trade union federation. Even within those confederations, the pressure of rank and file members has forced the leaders to act.

Workers' united front needed

May Day 2010 was an outstanding victory for the working class. It showed that working class action led by militant trade unionists and revolutionary youth can mobilise mass support and even force the existing leaders of mass organisations, despite their loyalty to the government, to mobilise their own organisations too.

Faced with a capitalist crisis of historic severity, the Turkish revolutionary left has two related tasks. The first is to create a unified revolutionary party on a programme of transitional demands that provides a bridge between the needs of the struggle today and the fight for working class power. The second is to unite the rank and file of the trade unions into councils of workers' delegates to organise mass political strikes to stop the government making the workers' pay for the crisis.

A new party and a rank and file movement within the unions could help resolve the crisis of leadership in the Turkish working class movement, by mounting a challenge to the hold of the treacherous bureaucrats like Kumlu and fighting for action despite them where necessary. This could allow a successful defence of the working class in a united strike wave. As in Greece, this could throw Turkish capitalism into an even deeper crisis, for which there is only one progressive solution: working class power and revolutionary socialism.

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