



# The Turkish Spring

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For nearly a week, Turkey has been shaken by the biggest mass protests for more than a decade. What began on the previous Friday as a peaceful protest against the building of a hotel on Taksim Square has grown into a countrywide revolt against Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his governing AKP party.

From protests at Gezi Park...

The first protests began in the night of Sunday 26th of May as bulldozers rolled into Taksim Square in preparation for clearing the nearby Gezi Park of trees. The park, which is in Istanbul's inner city, has to make way for a new hotel, built in the style of a former military barracks of the Ottoman Empire, and a shopping centre, a symbol of the AKP's politics. Already it is calculated that more than 11 shopping centres in Istanbul have been wrongly built. Despite this, a further 110 major shopping centres are to be built, 80 of them in Istanbul and the capital, Ankara.

For the rulers, these are signs of "modernisation" and of the economic boom. For the working class and poor they are an expression of the neoliberal politics of the conservative Islamist AKP government under Erdogan, many believe that he wants to build these as his "monuments". But the compromise between the ruling class and sections of the petty bourgeoisie and the working class, which promised economic growth in exchange for political peace, no longer seems to be holding.

The war against the Kurds, the brutal treatment of workers, as in the recent strike in the tobacco industry, as well as the ever sharper restrictions on press freedom and democratic rights were the basis upon which Turkish and foreign capital enriched itself. Already, in the last year, there were more and more isolated protests, even in the non-Kurdish regions, against the increasingly authoritarian regime.

The struggle over Gezi Park, which is one of the only green areas in Istanbul and, moreover, is an important assembly point for the working class movement in Turkey, was thus the trigger, not the cause, of the current mass protests.

## Countrywide revolt

Throughout the week, there have been repeated confrontations with the police who are determined to uproot the trees in Gezi Park by any means necessary. They have used pepper spray and batons and set fire to protestors' tents. However, after a brief time, the demonstrators always returned and in ever greater numbers. For a while, it appeared as though they would be successful in stopping the clearing of the park after the parliamentarians of the BDP, a Kurdish party, and the CHP, the National Kemalist opposition party, raised questions about the planning permission.

But appearances can be deceptive. On Friday 31, with already more than 5000 activists, mainly young, assembled in the park, the police attacked. Their violence was on such a scale that, according to activists, some were killed. The police aimed their teargas guns at people's heads and stomachs. Water cannons laced with pepper spray were turned on the demonstrators. But the Rubicon had been crossed. The violence which the Erdogan regime used to try to clear the park was like oil on a fire and it produced a social explosion.

The solidarity effect was huge. In no time at all, masses of people from the working class districts of Istanbul streamed

onto the streets with youth and women particularly in the frontline of the struggle. Even sections of the petty bourgeoisie showed their solidarity. Clubs stayed closed and local shopkeepers and residents opened their doors to give help to the wounded. A well-known TV reporter even interrupted their programme and openly called on people to protest.

In street fighting that lasted for hours, and in which the police acted with unbelievable harshness, demonstrators attempted to take over the park and force out the hated police. On Saturday, they were able to take back control of Taksim Square. In the meantime, the protests had spread to over 70 cities. The demands have also become more radical, more and more often one heard slogans calling for the fall of the government.

However, the violence from the side of the government also increased. Although the police were forced to flee from Taksim Square, they then regrouped in other parts of the city. Hundreds were arrested and many were seriously injured. Erdogan himself made a provocative speech that made it clear that he would make no compromise but wanted to provoke a showdown with the working class.

"Marauders, terrorists and extremist" he called the people on the streets. By contrast, he himself was a "servant of the people". Shortly before his trip abroad, he did indicate that there would be an investigation into whether police violence had been "disproportionate" but for the political demands he had nothing but scorn. About the protests over Gezi Park he said, "you want trees? You can have trees. Perhaps we could even plant some in your gardens." On the building of the projects, however, he would not be budged. Although he had the advantage of press censorship and the loyalty to the government of most of the mass media, by this stage, the scale of the protests had grown so much that they could no longer be concealed.

That was above all because of the unbelievable scale of the solidarity with the resistance. Erdogan was unable to fully control the flow of information unless he wanted to take down the entire Internet, and that would have provoked an "all or nothing" situation.

There were others who did not want that, above all, the hypocritical politicians of the USA and EU. After days of bloody confrontations, they began to notice that the violence was "leading to unrest" and that it should be "kept within reasonable bounds". Thus the German government let it be known via the Human Rights Commissioner, Loening, that they were "concerned at the developments in Istanbul and other cities in Turkey". Freedoms of speech and assembly in a democracy should be "fundamental rights that are upheld and protected. Levelheadedness and de-escalation on all sides" were the needs of the moment.

Above all, they saw the danger of a destabilisation of a government that they want to see maintained, particularly in order to carry out the policies of privatisation and neoliberalism in the interests of the leading imperialists within the European Union. It was not the violence of the state as such that was condemned, but the massive resistance it provoked that gave cause for concern.

However, even within the movement there are also false friends, namely the Kemalist party, CHP. Although it is a secular party and might appear as a progressive alternative to the AKP and Erdogan, from a social point of view this party is at least as dangerous a threat to the movement as the current government. It is a determined champion of the war against the Kurds. They have no objections to privatisation and the AKP's pro-Turkish capital policies, they would only seek to implement them by different means, in short, they want to pursue policies for Capital themselves, instead of leaving it to the AKP.

But there is one not unimportant fact that distinguishes the CHP from the AKP. The CHP has very strong ties to the military and the generals who are certainly not pleased by the limits that Erdogan has placed on their powers. As long as the protests are directed against the AKP, the CHP presents itself as the opposition. However, should it come to the overthrow of the government, the CHP would immediately push for the military to take the lead in the state, at least if the working class itself could not offer, and fight for, an alternative.

Another false friend is the Turkish president Gul. Whilst Erdogan allows the police to attack demonstrators brutally and rejects any question of compromise, Gul presents himself as a more reasonable "People's president".

Nobody should be fooled by this. Gul does not only come from the same party as Erdogan. Even the role-playing, here the "hard" and "evil" Erdogan, there the "understanding" Gul, has been used repeatedly to undermine protests against government measures with Gul indicating a preparedness for compromise but nonetheless the substance of the government policies being implemented.

For a Turkish spring of the workers and the youth

At the moment, the movement is on the offensive, it is still growing and conquering new positions. However, it will soon reach its limits if it cannot find a clear perspective and organise an alternative power which is not only able to protest against police violence and AKP but can replace both. Neither is possible with the CHP or with the "supporters from the democratic West".

Although the labour movement is both organisationally and politically deeply divided, the current situation offers an historic opportunity to overcome these weaknesses.

The Confederation of Public Workers' Unions, KESK, called a two day strike from Wednesday, June 5, and the metalworkers' union is also due to strike. However, it is absolutely necessary that these strikes are developed into an all embracing and unlimited general strike. That many trade union bureaucrats oppose this is no surprise. Their opposition can be overcome if the Turkish left immediately calls for assemblies in the workplaces and amongst the strikers to elect strike committees accountable to the rank and file.

The same thing is necessary in every district, in every town. The movement must organise itself to be able to defend its districts against attacks from the police and to organise discussions about how to organise further resistance politically. Equally essential is for the workers' movement to spread propaganda against the government amongst the rank-and-file soldiers, to call on them not to implement repressive orders and to raise demands that force a wedge between them and the high command, combined with the social and political demands of the working class.

In order to give the movement a perspective, it needs clear political demands that go beyond the withdrawal of the police and democratic reforms. A call to bring down Erdogan, which is raised more and more often, must be given a political content. That means an answer to the question who is to replace Erdogan and with what programme. A CHP government would only mean going from bad to worse.

A political general strike to stop police violence, together with the building of workers' council-style organisations in the city districts and the creation of self defence organisations, would be important steps towards forming a workers' and peasants' government which could base itself on these organisations. The sharpening of the struggle and a political general strike would raise the decisive question, who rules; the Turkish bourgeoisie or the working class? An end to the war against the Kurds and to the wave of privatisations and social attacks on the working class and the middle layers, is incompatible with a democratic capitalist Turkey. Equally, the power of the Army is impossible to break without a revolutionary change.

If this is successful, if the working class in Turkey is in the position to form a party on the basis of a revolutionary programme, then that would not only sweep away the Turkish bourgeoisie and bring freedom to oppressed people such as the Kurds. It would also be a mighty beacon for the struggle in Europe, especially in Greece, against the crisis. In the Middle East it would be a model for how the power of ruling cliques can be broken.

Join in the solidarity demonstrations, meetings and protest actions at Turkish embassies and consulates! Mass rebellion in Turkey needs our solidarity!

