

Turkish ship-breaking workers stop working amid a wildcat strike wave

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Over 1,500 workers working at ship-breaking yards in the western Turkish city of İzmir's Alia?a district have been on strike since February 11, demanding wage increases and better conditions. Amid a wildcat strike wave this year in Turkey, the work stoppage began against an inadequate wage increase at one company, and then rapidly expanded to all 22 yards.

The strike of ship-breaking workers is a part of a wave of wildcat strikes that has spread throughout Turkey since the year began. Workers in Turkey, like their class brothers and sisters in other countries, are taking action against the economic and social consequences of the deadly pandemic policies pursued by the government in the interests of the ruling class.

Alia?a, one of the largest ship-breaking centers in the world, is a critically important industrial area. There are giant petrochemical companies such as Petkim and Socar in the region, as well as the Turkish Petroleum Refineries (Tüpra?), which is Turkey's largest enterprise. Annually, nearly 900,000 tons of metal scrap extracted at scrap-yards provides raw materials to steel factories in the region.

Striking workers, who gathered in the shipyard area every day and are under police blockade, held a mass march yesterday with the banner "Ship-breaking will not be a hell, workers will not be slaves: Accept our demands." These non-union workers elected their own representatives and stated that they will continue striking until their demands are accepted.

The striking ship-breaking workers' demands include the following:

- 350-500 TL (US\$25-37) daily wages;
- Their work should be classified as a "heavy and dangerous industry";
- Working only a half day on Saturdays;
- The company should provide personal protective

equipment;

- No workers should be fired due to the strike
- Companies should accept representatives elected by the workers.

In meetings with the workers' representatives, the companies rejected these demands.

Turkish courts threw out a lawsuit filed by a ship-breaking company in Alia?a against one of the workers' representatives, demanding a "precautionary cessation of the strike." The court stated: "The lawsuit was brought against a single worker. Considering the fact that a single worker cannot strike, in the concrete case, it was necessary to reject the request for a 'precautionary cessation of the strike' on the ground that it could not be said that there was a strike in accordance with the definition in the law."

Speaking to the *Gazete Duvar*, one striker said the following about deadly working conditions: "We are exposed to chemicals such as smoke, lead and asbestos. Apart from this, there is a risk of falling from a height and heavy tonnage items falling on us. There are also dangers such as a crane overturning or ship breakage. Fatal accidents occur as a result of the crashing and crushing of construction machines."

Before the strike, Kamil Önal, chairman of the Ship Recycling Industrialists Association, said in a statement on February 2, "We will continue to work for the future of our country, acting in the spirit of national solidarity, in a time that is going through difficulties," citing the COVID-19 pandemic and the Turkish lira's collapse against the US dollar. He claimed: "Not only in production capacity; we are also number one in terms of environment and labor protection. ... Our facilities are pointed out as 'exemplary facilities' in the world."

In reality, two workers lost their lives at a ship breaking yard last September when a rope broke. In

July, two workers died after a gas explosion in the same area.

One worker told the Anka news agency in January of the devastating consequences of toxic chemicals in the scrap yards: “There are people who died of lung cancer. My father was one of them. I know three or four of my father’s friends who died of lung cancer.” He added: “In fact, asbestos is not just dangerous for us and our families. It is dangerous for the entire Alia?a region. It harms nature, people, the environment, everything.”

Nimet Koç, a representative of Asbestos and Hazardous Wastes Association in İzmir, said: “Asbestos causes pleural cancer, peritoneal cancer, deadly mesothelioma and its variants. People suffocate to death and have to live with oxygen resuscitators.”

The striker who spoke to the *Gazete Duvar* said: “They give one mask a day, but that mask loses its function after two hours. They give gloves once a week and we have to manage with it for a week. They don’t give work clothes anyway and we buy it with our own money.” He pointed to rapidly-rising inflation, stating: “Even if we get a raise, these raises will melt after three days. It won’t make any sense. We therefore added to our demands a regular raise every six months. Our resistance will continue until our demands are accepted.”

According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), official annual inflation last month hit 48 percent, the highest since the 2001 crisis. The independent Inflation Research Group (ENAG) announced that the actual rate was 114 percent. According to the pro-government Türk-?? union confederation, as of January 2022 the poverty line for a family of four in Turkey reached 13,843 liras (\$1,015). However, the minimum wage is only 4,250 TL (\$315).

According to the Labor Studies Group in Turkey, 65 strikes took place between January 6 and February 14 this year. Except for a strike at the BBC Istanbul service, all developed as “wildcat strikes,” outside union control. In total, nearly 13,500 workers joined these strikes, 29 of which occurred in textiles, 10 in transportation, seven in petrochemicals and six in the metal sector. Istanbul and the southeastern city of Gaziantep had 22 strikes each, followed by İzmir, Kocaeli and Mersin.

Turkish health care workers, who are at the forefront of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and the

suffering caused by official policies of mass infection, also struck for three days in this month for wages and benefits.

Strikers in Alia?a expressed their solidarity with other workers involved in the same struggle, especially with workers at Farplas Automotive in Kocaeli and Migros storehouse in Esenyurt, Istanbul. In January, over 2,300 workers at the Farplas Automotive factory in Gebze, Kocaeli stopped production by protesting a low wage raise. The company responded by laying off more than 100 workers.

Storehouse workers at Migros, one of Turkey’s largest supermarket chains, also went on a wildcat strike on February 3 against the company’s low wage raise. The company rejected the 450 workers’ demands and called in the police. On the evening of February 8, police raided the workplace, detaining about 150. Then 250 workers were laid off.

This wildcat strike wave is part of an emerging global working class movement that marks an end to the decades-long suppression of the class struggle by the ruling class with the assistance of union bureaucracies around the world. Workers are taking action themselves, without trying to join a union or engage in the months-long “bargaining” required for a “legal strike.”

This directly raises the need to organize rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, and to organize and unify their struggles across Turkey and internationally. The emerging movement in the working class signals the awakening of a social force that can put an end to the COVID-19 pandemic and the danger of war and save millions of lives. The *World Socialist Web Site* urges workers entering into struggle to form their own rank-and-file committees and unite in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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