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Turkey

# Class war ?n t?me of war

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**“Now, on the basis of State of Emergency we instantly intervene in any place where there is threat of strike. We say no, we don’t let any strike happen here.”**

**Recep Tayyip Erdo?an (during the meeting organized by YASED, International Investors Association on 12 July 2017)**

**“So some will rise again and again to engage in a strike... Pardon me, but there will be no such thing...” Recep Tayyip Erdo?an**

**(during the speech at the 24th General Assembly Meeting of MÃœS?AD on 7 June 2017 )**

**“If you follow this call (call to protest Afrin operation) and make the mistake to go on the streets (to protest), you will pay the price very seriously. This is a national struggle. Whatever comes ahead of us in this national struggle, we will crash it and move on, you know that. No concessions, no minimal flexibility.” Recep Tayyip Erdo?an (during his speech on 21 January announcing operation “Olive Branch”)**

On January 21, while Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdo?an was announcing his military operation against Afrin, at the same time in the city of Bursa, which is the heart of the automotive industry in Turkey (and one of the most important hubs for the entire European automotive industry), trade unions in metal industry were coincidentally announcing their strike decision which would affect most of the industry in that city.

During his announcement, Erdo?an threatened anyone who protests against the attack on Afrin saying that they will pay a serious price. In the same way, a few days after announcement of the strike in the metal industry, a decree was published prohibiting these strikes in the metal industry, saying these strikes are harmful to national security. Because even though the main target of the military operation, cynically named “Olive Branch” is the Kurdish enclave in Afrin, Erdo?an’s “real enemy is always at home”. That’s why he wants to silence any sort of opposition to war and any sort of demonstration by workers to defend their working conditions in the same time.

The strike decision in the metal industry was a result of ongoing collective bargaining negotiations with the Metal Employers Union. The main issues in dispute were wage increases and the length of the agreement. The unions asked for a two year agreement, but the metal employers were pressing for 3 years. Following wildcat strikes in May 2015, against the main union in metal sector over bad working conditions and low wages, which were very militant but resulted in mass dismissals, in this bargaining term even yellow unions were more cautious. [1] All the unions were forced by workers to take a strike decision after the failure of collective bargaining negotiations.

The automotive industry produces the country’s biggest export item. According to research by the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce in 2016, Turkey’s 4 biggest exporters from any sector were all multinational automotive companies. Ford was the first one with US \$3,958 billion, second FIAT’s joint venture with \$3,247 billion, third is Renault with \$2,834 billion, Toyota \$2,685 billion. (these figures are just the exports of the companies). But despite this enormous wealth, automotive workers working in multinationals such as Renault, Mercedes, Ford, FIAT etc, earn as little as \$390 Euros per month for a 45 hour week. So the demands of the workers for better working conditions overcame the political environment in the country where every sort of demand is labelled as treason.

But then the war came to help the unions who were reluctant to take the decision to strike. Just after the launch of the military campaign, the rhetoric of “national security” emerged again and the Türk Metal union made a declaration, saying that “we are standing alongside the Turkish Armed Forces with all our heart and therefore the board of directors of the Turkish Metal Trade Union has decided not to take action in the city squares or on the streets, taking into consideration the circumstances of our country due to the operation carried out beyond our borders by Turkish Armed Forces.” They withdrew from the strike, but the other union involved, Birlesik Metal, issued a statement saying they would go ahead [2]. In the end the strike, planned to start on February 2, did not go ahead because as following negotiations, the workers were given a significant wage increase – 24 per cent for the first six months. [3]

Erdo?an was talking about and preparing this military attack for a very long time. Turkey tried to get support (or at least consent) from the USA and Russia before starting this military operation. Now a week after the start, it is possible to find many videos and images of destruction created by air strikes of Turkish army and torture of prisoners by Turkish backed Islamist militias. After the start of the war, the government kept their promise and detained around 400 people because of their social media posts against the war. The entire executive council of Turkish Chamber of Medicine were arrested because of an anti-war declaration called “War is a public health problem.”

War is rather useful for the Erdo?an government in trying to solve their governing crisis. Their rhetoric, based on national security, has succeeded in bringing together all sides of Turkish society. This pretext of a national crisis, allows the government to advance their already authoritarian agenda – even including banning the planned strike by metal workers.

PS:

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[1] See earlier International Viewpoint article [here](#) for further information about the 2015 strike

[2] See [Birlesik Metal statement](#).

[3] [See this statement from the federation Birlesik Metal belongs to](#)