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Turkey

Spring comes to Turkey

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Tom Gagné explains how small protests to stop the demolition of a park in Istanbul snowballed into a challenge to the government and its machinery of repression.

AFTER A day filled with police violence against unarmed, peaceful occupiers and protesters, one of my old friends from high school, living near Taksim Square in Istanbul reported: "It's midnight, and my street is alive. All the neighbors are leaning out their windows, stepping out on their balconies, whistling, banging pots and pans, shouting, 'Tayyip istifa! Tayyip istifa!' (Resign Tayyip, resign!)"

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the prime minister of Turkey and head of the conservative, Islamist-influenced Justice and Development Party (AKP), is in the hot seat—faced with an uprising that people from many different political viewpoints are comparing to the Arab Spring that swept across the Middle East in 2011.

Erdoğan has been at the forefront of a neoliberal reinvention of Turkey. This has included the nearly complete privatization of nationalized industries, the rise of Turkey as a regional power with its sights set on domination of natural resources in the Mediterranean—and the utter destruction of ancient Byzantine and Ottoman neighborhoods in Istanbul, Turkey's largest city, in the name of urban renewal and gentrification, with the goal of turning Istanbul into a major financial center.

This last element is what sparked the mass protests that erupted last week and continue to spread into this one.

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SINCE FEBRUARY 2012, Gezi Park—a small green oasis in the middle of Istanbul's busiest district, Taksim Square—has been slated for demolition as part of the latest urban renewal project of the AKP, which has faced little to no political opposition over the past several years. The government's plan is to build a replica of the Taksim Military Barracks, demolished in 1940—and turn the structure into a shopping mall.

With construction about to go forward, on Monday, May 27, a series of semi-spontaneous protests resulted in the occupation of Gezi Park by a small group of activists determined to stop the uprooting of trees and green space. That night, bulldozers began demolishing the walls of the park—but the process was slowed by the occupiers.

The protests built over the following days. By Thursday morning, the demonstrators had halted the construction temporarily after a prominent Kurdish politician, Şeyda Süreyya Aker, stood in front of a bulldozer. Unable to produce the necessary legal documents granting it authorization to demolish, the construction company went to the Istanbul police.

By Thursday night, up to 1,000 demonstrators were occupying the park. Their protests coincided with a large march in honor of the anniversary of the deadly Israeli military assault on the Mavi Marmara, the Turkish vessel that was the flagship of the Gaza Freedom Flotilla in 2010.

Each night during the week, according to Sungar Savran, editor of the newspaper *İsci Mücadelesi* (Workers' Struggle), in a report that appeared at the Canadian Socialist Project's *Bullet* website, the police waited until the pre-dawn hours to launch their vicious attacks on protesters. As Savran reported:

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Istanbul has become a battlefield covered by tear gas...This would have been no news at all: Turkish police are famous for their brutality in dealing with demonstrations unwelcome to the government. Only a month ago, on May Day, they dispersed a gathering of thousands of workers and unionists using tear gas unsparingly...The difference lies in the determination and audacity of the protestors. .

By Friday, Gezi Park was sealed off by police as the street confrontations continued. But the shocking images of police brutality had by now spread around the world, sparking outrage and the biggest mobilizations in Turkey itself were still to come.

Judging from the photos and videos taken over the past few days, it wouldn't be unfair to say that the streets of Istanbul resemble those of Cairo during the initial stages of the Egyptian Revolution. Tear gas canisters litter the ground. There are bloodied faces and broken limbs. The authorities are using tanks and water cannons in an attempt to disperse demonstrators. Protesters are burning cars, erecting barricades in response, while the banners and graffiti of the protestors pronounce the word "revolution."

Yusuf Cemal, an independent trade union activist, reported: "They [the cops] even used real bullets—we didn't know if there was anyone dead or not. We were fighting them from 7 p.m. until 6 a.m."

Onur Devrim Aeba?, a socialist activist and member of the Revolutionary Socialist Workers Party, described the situation:

There were socialists, anarchists, climate activists and all sorts of concerned citizens. Police attacked barbarically again; using their gas bombs to shoot people in their heads. That attack changed everything.

The main initiative "Taksim Solidarity" called for a massive protest on Friday. More than 10,000 people came to Taksim that evening and did not retreat, despite hundreds of tear gas bombs. Then the struggle spread to other cities, on a massive scale. Today, June 1, more than 100,000 took back the park and Taksim Square. Police used plastic bullets and water cannons. More than 900 people were detained, and at least a dozen were seriously injured. There have been no fatalities for now.

The movement spread literally all over Turkey, tens of thousands marched in big cities such as Ankara and Izmir. The participants were not the "usual suspects" thousands of young people joined a political march for the first time. They were labeled as "apolitical" by older generations, but now we are taking part in politics.

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WHAT STARTED as a comparatively small protest to protect a park and its history from destruction has turned into a watershed moment. It has galvanized all of the unacknowledged grievances, political problems and latent anger in a country that has been shifting more and more toward a one-party state promoting conservative religious values and a swifter-than-ever conversion to neoliberalism.

As British socialist and author Richard Seymour wrote for the Guardian newspaper, "[T]his is more than an environmental protest. It has become a lightning conductor for all the grievances accumulated against the government."

The protests in Istanbul—and, now, across the rest of Turkey—have given confidence to the trade union movement. This is a movement with a rich history of struggle, but also of repression. It has remained largely passive

over the past decade of neoliberal reforms under the AKP.

One of the four main unions in Turkey, the Confederation of Public Workers' Unions, has called for a sector-wide strike on June 5. The possibility of a general strike is not unthinkable if Erdoğan and the AKP remain firm in their drive to demolish Gezi Park.

The courageous demonstrations in Turkey are inspiring support around the world. Last weekend, Occupy activists in New York City marched to the Turkish consulate from Zuccotti Park in solidarity with those fighting in Turkey. There was a lively demonstration in Boston, and more to come this week in cities such as Los Angeles, San Francisco and Chicago.

The plan to destroy Gezi Park is part of a wider agenda for Istanbul and all of Turkey. It began in earnest in 2008, when the city was declared a "capital of culture" for 2010. For Erdoğan and the AKP, this was a green light for further development and urban "renewal" plans, concentrated in their hands.

The forced gentrification program in Istanbul began with the destruction of a 550-year-old neighborhood called Sulukule. The entire neighborhood, populated mostly by an impoverished Roma community, was displaced. Next on the list was the largely Kurdish neighborhood of Tarlabasi—a historic area full of migrant workers. The project destroyed Ottoman-era buildings and a cultural heritage of the marginalized Jewish, Greek, Armenian and now Kurdish peoples who used to live there.

There are 50 other proposed gentrification projects in Istanbul, but the proposed destruction of historic Gezi Park is the last stand for many activists. It's clear that huge numbers of Turks are tired of everything about the AKP's neoliberal projects—and they want to express their outrage.

Taksim Square, where Gezi Park is located, has been a profound symbol for the Turkish left since May Day in 1977, when dozens of trade union militants and radicals were massacred by still unknown assailants. In the years following the brutal military dictatorship of the early 1980s, protesters tried to take Taksim on May Day as a symbolic gesture to fallen comrades.

In 2010, the police opened the square up for May Day demonstrations under tight security—this past May Day, it was shut down again, and trade union activists and other leftists were met with state violence.

The future of a different Turkey lies in Taksim Square—with a new generation is taking up this fight.

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