FREE MEHMET TÜRKMEN! THE ARREST OF AN INDEPENDENT UNION LEADER IS AN ATTACK ON THE ENTIRE WORKING CLASS



BY WILL LEHMAN
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I condemn in the strongest possible terms the arrest of Mehmet Türkmen, general secretary of the independent rank-and-file union BİRTEK-SEN (United Textile, Weaving and Leather Workers' Union), and demand his immediate and unconditional release.

Türkmen was seized in a pre-dawn police raid on his home in Gaziantep and charged with "inciting the public to hatred and enmity." This is a transparent frame-up and political pretext aimed at criminalizing opposition. His only "crime" is telling the truth: that workers at Sırma Halı have gone months without pay, and that the state mobilizes police not against employers who steal wages, but against workers who protest.

What is being criminalized is not "hate speech," but the emergence of a conscious and militant movement of workers organizing independently of the pro-corporate union apparatus. As Türkmen himself has explained, workers are killed and maimed every day in unsafe workplaces, while employers face no consequences. Yet a workers' leader is dragged before the courts for denouncing wage theft and dangerous conditions. This exposes the class nature of the state: the courts and the police, just as much as the politicians, function as instruments of the employers.

Türkmen's arrest is part of a broader offensive against a growing movement of workers in Turkey. Migros warehouse workers, the 1,243 coal miners at Polyak Mining in İzmir who seized their mine and halted production, the carpet workers at Sırma Halı — all are fighting the same issues: wage theft, unsafe conditions, and a union bureaucracy that serves the bosses, not the workers.

The response of the Erdoğan government, as with Trump in the US, is repression. As Turkey is increasingly drawn into the expanding war in the Middle East, the government is determined to give no quarter to any form of social or political opposition — above all from the working class. A government preparing for war cannot tolerate workers who organize independently, strike for their wages, and refuse to be silenced. The assault on democratic rights and the assault on workers' living standards are two sides of the same process, and both are intensified by the drive toward militarism and war.

Corporations operate globally, and their attacks are coordinated across borders. Our response must be the same. I call on autoworkers and all workers in the United States and internationally to take up the defense of Mehmet Türkmen. His struggle is our struggle. We must demand:

- The immediate and unconditional release of Mehmet Türkmen and all detained workers and organizers
- An end to all repression of strikes, protests, and democratic rights
- Full payment of all unpaid wages and the enforcement of safe working conditions

At the same time, workers must draw the necessary conclusions. The trade union apparatus, tied to the state and corporations, will not defend us. What is

needed are rank-and-file committees in every workplace—democratically controlled, accountable to workers, and independent of the bureaucracy—to transfer power to the shop floor and unite workers across industries and national borders.

These committees must link internationally. Workers should reach out across borders, coordinate actions, and build networks of solidarity capable of defending any worker facing repression. No struggle can remain isolated.

In my campaign for UAW president, I fight for this perspective: the transfer of power to workers on the shop floor through the building of rank-and-file committees in every workplace. The same perspective is needed in Turkey and everywhere.

When workers organize democratically and internationally—when we refuse to be subordinated by a pro-corporate bureaucracy—we can halt production and force concessions that no court or government will grant voluntarily. We can even stop war.

Eugene Debs, the great American socialist and labor leader, was imprisoned for speaking out against injustice — prosecuted for telling the truth in a time when the ruling class hellbent on war wanted silence from workers. Standing before the court that sentenced him to ten years in prison for opposing American entry into the imperialist slaughter of World War I, Debs said: "While there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free." Those words were spoken over a century ago. They are as true today as they were then.

Demand the release of Mehmet Türkmen! An injury to one is an injury to all!

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