

## ITUC OnLine

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### Spotlight interview with Kenan Ozturk (TUMTIS/ TURK-IS, Turkey)

Trade union repression worsening: unions fighting back with international solidarity

Brussels, 1 October 2010 (ITUC OnLine): When workers at UPS Parcels in Turkey opted to join Turkey's TUMTIS road transport union, the company responded with a wave of intimidation and sackings. So far 160 workers have been dismissed, with no regard for the procedures foreseen in Turkish law. In July the conflict escalated even further when the manager of a sub-contractor fired shots outside the offices of a public notary in Izmir, where he had tried to force workers to resign their union membership. As the union prepares to meet an extremely hostile management for a second round of negotiations on 2 October, TUMTIS President Kenan Ozturk talks to the ITUC.

You have had one rather unsatisfactory meeting with management in September. What do you expect to happen at the 2 October meeting?

For a long time management refused to engage in any dialogue with TUMTIS. That first meeting was the culmination of a very long struggle, and without the work of the ITF in coordinating international solidarity it would not have been possible. At that first meeting on 21 September we did not make sufficient progress because the employer would only agree to reinstate a small minority of the 160 workers. The union position is to defend all 160, and that is what we are asking for. I cannot predict with certainty what will happen on 2 October. One possibility is that they will persist with the same position as at last meeting, in which case it will not be possible to make progress. If the employer wishes to have peace at the workplace, all the workers who were fired have to be reinstated.

The dispute has already lasted six months. How are the 160 workers who have lost their jobs coping?

They have received help. First of all financial contributions were made to our workers' hardship funds from our fellow workers in the ETF and ITF affiliates, and our own union has also spent a lot of its budget. Every month 500 Turkish lira (about 250 Euros) is given to each worker. Apart from this we provide transport every day and food at the picket line, so thanks to this they can survive, despite the very harsh living conditions. Our own national confederation TURK-IS has also provided some financial assistance.

You have received widespread support from the international trade union movement. In addition to the financial support, what has this solidarity meant to you?

The ITF and ETF affiliated unions have given amazing support to our fight. Their officers have visited the picket lines several times and showed solidarity. On 1 September, for example, there was a day of worldwide solidarity actions that were quite remarkable.

Those global actions were very important in inspiring our own struggle and giving us the impetus to move forward. The solidarity we have been shown has given moral strength to our union and our members.

What has support been like at the national level?

Our national labour confederation TURK-IS has given us its full support, which we greatly appreciate. TURK-IS representatives visited our picket line and they have provided financial assistance to the workers' hardship fund. TURK-IS has also published a press release which condemned the firing of 160 workers who simply exercised their

constitutional right to organise, and supported the struggle of TUMTIS against the UPS. Representatives of unions from the other national centres, DISK and KESK, have also visited our picket line, joined our demonstrations and given their support.

This dispute is by no means the first. It comes against a background of anti-trade union repression, including the judicial harassment of trade unions. One example is the Horoz case in Ankara. Can you tell us more about it?

To begin with, it is important to stress that the multinational companies operating in Turkey are using the country's anti-democratic laws to repress trade unions and workers' trade union rights. The Horoz case in Ankara is yet another example of the intolerance of the right to organise. It is standard practice for employers to bring criminal charges when their workers start to organise. In the case of the trucking company Horoz Cargo, the employer made groundless accusations against the union leaders. It was very telling that the police themselves went to the employers and convinced them to bring charges. This case is a joint conspiracy by the employer and the police. The main charge against TUMTIS is that the union leaders have established an organisation to pressure or intimidate the employer. TUMTIS's counter argument is that a trade union by definition is an organisation that is supposed to put pressure on the employer to ensure the respect of workers' rights.

Nurettin Kilicdogan is one of the seven union leaders from Horoz whose court case is ongoing. He faces a possible prison sentence of 36 years. The next court hearing is on 12 October. The prosecutors claim that he forced the workers to join the union and exerted pressure on the employer. The evidence before the court, however, comes purely from the employers' complaint. Not a single worker has complained of being pressured into joining the union.

I want to emphasise that such problems are not only TUMTIS problems. That kind of extreme pressure is put on other unions. Other TURK-IS affiliates, such as the DERI-IS textile workers' union, the HABER-IS communications workers' union and the HAVA-IS air transport workers' union all organise private sector workers and are all facing similar criminal charges. Another union, Birlesik Metal-Is, affiliated to DISK, is faced with even more court cases than us, because they organise in very difficult private sector work places.

Another case of anti union dismissals took place at the port in Mersin. What has happened there?

We started our organising campaign in February 2009 in Mersin International Port. We were organising workers at a port-loading company called Akansel Nakliyat, sub-contracted by PSA (Port of Singapore Authority). At the beginning we faced employer strategies similar to those of UPS: the employer forced workers to resign from the union and finally fired 200 workers who were our members. The workers were very committed to this fight and their resistance lasted four months. We also had international support. Our Global Union Federation the ITF visited the picket line in Mersin, and there was support from an ITF-affiliated organisation at the PSA. Eventually all the workers were reinstated and TUMTIS signed a collective agreement with the Akansel. The success in this specific case is a victory for global solidarity action.

How do you see things moving on from here, both in the UPS dispute and more broadly, the trade union rights situation in Turkey?

We believe our workers at UPS did not commit a crime. They simply exercised the basic human right to organise. The UPS has violated its own business code of conduct, in which it promises to respect labour rights at their workplaces. So we believe that our demands are legitimate and we expect that we will win this dispute and our demands will be accepted. Because multinational companies dominate all sectors in the global

economy, trade union success in the multinationals depends on international cooperation and global solidarity. The previous success at Marsin port, and also UNILEVER Turkey, demonstrate that point.

Global solidarity is growing in the UPS case. On 9 and 10 October representatives of ITF and ETF affiliates will come to Istanbul to attend an international solidarity meeting and visit the picket line. Because such solidarity is growing we believe that UPS will not be able to keep to its position for much longer. We will win this case.

As far as trade union rights are concerned, it is important to understand that even though the AKP government claims it brings greater democracy to Turkey, this is not happening. Trade union rights are regressing, not progressing, in Turkey. I have little hope that the government will change the anti-democratic laws. However, the TUMTIS strategy is to strengthen trade union unity. We are joining forces with affiliates from different confederations in their fight for union rights. It is also important to realise that Turkish trade unions are learning a lot about international solidarity. In the past, when trade unions from Europe were critical of the anti-democratic repression of trade unions in Turkey, that was perceived as outside interference in the national affairs of the country, even by unions themselves. But now this perception has changed. There is a greater understanding that the workers homeland is not their nation but the whole world, and that all workers share common interests. I am therefore optimistic that a more radical militant union movement could emerge in Turkey in the near future.

The ITUC is about to send a protest letter to UPS management in Atlanta. What more can the national and international trade union movement do for you in terms of solidarity?

In order to push the UPS to accept our demands and change its anti-democratic behaviour towards the workers, we need to exert more pressure on the company and escalate the solidarity campaign. The resistance has already lasted six months and the workers live in extremely difficult conditions. In order to resolve this dispute as soon as possible, we need to put more pressure on the company. In that sense we welcome and appreciate the initiative taken by the ITUC (\*) to prepare this letter to Atlanta management which we think will be very useful.

Interview done by Sara Hammerton

(\*)See ITUC protest letter. [http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/10-09-30\\_UPS\\_anti-union\\_dismissals.pdf](http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/10-09-30_UPS_anti-union_dismissals.pdf)

See the global campaign of the International Transport Federation (ITF) in support of justice for the UPS workers in Turkey: <http://www.itfglobal.org/campaigns/ups-justice.cfm>

-See ITUC online : « Turkey: Trade Unions Worldwide Show Their Solidarity with Sacked Turkish UPS Worker”: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/turkey-trade-unions-worldwide-show.html?lang=en>

- See also TUC online: « Turkey: Call for Protecting Human Rights Defenders against Judicial Harassment and Threats in Turkey » : <http://www.ituc-csi.org/turkey-call-for-protecting-human.html?lang=en>

- See the VIDEO « Turkey: Repression at the Torgem shipyard (Limter-Is) » : <http://www.ituc-csi.org/turkey-repression-at-the-torgem.html?lang=en>

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