

Report from Turkey: A Taste of Tahrir at Taksim

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Istanbul has become a battlefield covered by tear gas. The police, no doubt at the behest of the Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan and his AKP government, have been attacking protestors in the centre of the city, near Taksim Square, for five consecutive days. 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 had dispersed a gathering of thousands of workers and unionists using tear gas unsparingly. So nothing new on the police front. This time is different for another reason.



[Source: occupygezipics.tumblr.com]

The difference lies in the determination and audacity of the protestors. The first four days saw a growing number of people, reaching many thousands Thursday night, that is, the fourth day of action, set up a camp each night on the so-called Promenade near Taksim Square. Every night, in the small hours of the morning, the police attacked the campers and dismantled their tents, burning them on the last third and fourth nights. The protestors are trying to protect life, the life of very precious trees right in the middle of a city with extremely limited green area. The Metropolitan Municipality of Istanbul, under AKP rule, has been busy preparing the ground to build a shopping mall (in the guise of a historic building) in the place where stands the Promenade now.

Police Brutality

The sheer brutality of the police and some plainclothes thugs claiming to be municipal police (it is they who burnt down the tents) provoked the people of Istanbul to run to the aid of the attacked protestors. Istiklal, a major artery that runs from Taksim several kilometres south, a pedestrian zone that is the heart of culture, politics, entertainment and lately tourism, was soon packed full of people from one end to the other, Taksim Square itself being controlled by the police. Istiklal resounded to

chants against the government, some going somewhat rashly as far as predicting its imminent fall.

There have been demands for some time that the Foreign Minister, responsible for the criminal policy of the government in Syria, and the Interior Minister, whom we call the “Chemical Muammer,” as a reference to “Chemical Ali” of the Saddam administration, be removed from office. The removal of the latter has now already come squarely on the agenda. There were already unconfirmed rumours tonight that the chief of police for Istanbul has been dismissed. Even if this were true, which is too optimistic, this is not where the cleansing should stop!

The working-class, left forces and the youth of Turkey are coming out of a period of extreme political passivity. But for the incessant struggle waged by the Kurdish people, Turkey has been a desert in terms of mass struggles for the past 15 years at least, interrupted exceptionally by the struggle of the Tekel workers (the tobacco and alcoholic drinks company, privatized earlier) in winter 2009-2010 [1], unfortunately sold out by the union bureaucracy. So it would be rash to say that the movement is already at a point of no return. But the spirit is definitely one of regained self-confidence on the part of the masses. What is most important is to see how the organized working-class will react. There have been several important industrial actions lately. These may very well radicalize the attitude of some sections of the working-class, including the workers of Turkish Airlines. They have been on strike for a fortnight putting forth serious demands, albeit with limited participation. Their central demand is the reinstatement of 305 from among the work force, fired a year ago for a wildcat strike protesting the partial prohibition of strikes in civil aviation, which has always been a recognized right in the last half century. The prohibition of strikes has had to be rescinded, but the workers laid-off have yet to be reinstated.

More Strikes

Another strike is waiting in the wings, one with potentially devastating consequences for the government. This is the metal workers’ strike which has already been announced (a legal precondition), but not yet put into practice. If all the workers involved go on strike (for legal reasons this has to be some time in the course of June), this will amount to over one hundred thousand workers, in a sector that has become the main export engine of the country’s manufacturing industry in recent years. Although there are immensely complicated factors to be taken into account when analysing this potential strike, not least the clearly reactionary political stance of the ruling bureaucracy in the major union in the industry, the results may be dire in the context of this explosive situation.

History seems to be aiding the popular masses of Turkey. KESK, the Federation of Public Employees’ Unions, one of the fighting organizations within the union movement, had already declared a sector-wide strike for 5 June. This needs to be transformed into a general strike, adopted by the whole union movement, putting forth demands in the political sphere as well as voicing the considerable grievances of the workers of different sectors and industries. The present moment witnesses a people’s revolt in the face of the arrogance and repressive practice of the government. Should this be combined with an insurgent working-class movement, Turkey would become open to all kinds of revolutionary change.

It cannot be exaggerated how a revolutionary transformation of Turkey will have a tremendous impact on the rest of the Middle East and North Africa. Under Erdogan, Turkey has become a decisive actor in the region, a “model ally” of the U.S., role model for the newly fledgling Muslim governments of Egypt and Tunisia, frontline fighter for the Sunni front established by the Saudi and Qatar kingdoms in a potentially disastrous sectarian confrontation between the Sunni and Shiite

fronts in the region and a growing economic and military power with a hegemonic project. The elimination of this reactionary actor and its possible replacement by a progressive force at the helm of this NATO member will have immense repercussions throughout the region. Solidarity with the mass movement of Turkey will definitely be helpful to the progressive and revolutionary agenda in the whole Middle East.

Istanbul, 3 a.m.

I have just left another central square of Istanbul, itself not far from Taksim. The place is packed with people and thousands, even tens of thousands of cars are still slowly moving toward that square. There would have been nothing extraordinary about this – were it not almost three o'clock in the morning. Ankara, the capital city, was out protesting today as well. Izmir, the third biggest city on the Aegean sea, is still alive, with street fighting going on.

One blogger said tonight: “Well, Tayyip Erdogan, through his arrogance, has at last united Turk and Kurd, Sunni and Alevi and secular!” Well, this is what we have been saying all along. This was what happened when the Tekel workers entered their two and a half month fight. This is what is now happening on a much more gigantic scale.

This is not yet Tahrir. But demonstrations on the two continents of Istanbul, Asia and Europe at three in the morning, that is decidedly unusual and gives one a taste of Tahrir. This is not yet a revolution, but it is not only tear gas that marks the air in Istanbul. It is also a scent of revolutionary aspirations. •

Sungur Savran

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 16757), [The Tekel Strike in Turkey](#).