

Workers' and Human Rights in Turkey

Summary

The denial of workers' and human rights in Turkey is nothing new, but the situation has become significantly worse since the government imposed a state of emergency in July 2016. In little over two years President Erdoğan and the government of Turkey have used a series of draconian presidential decrees to suppress the rights of any perceived opponents, including trade unionists, public service workers, human rights defenders, journalists, the judiciary, politicians and academics. As a result, democracy, human and workers' rights and the rule of law have been severely diminished, and continue to be eroded, despite the official end of the state of emergency in July 2018.

- Trade union rights are severely restricted, despite protections in the constitution and international law. Workers are routinely denied the right to strike, although Turkey has signed ILO convention 87, Freedom of Association and Protection for the Right to Organise. The right to freedom of assembly is also extremely limited, with rallies and demonstrations regularly banned and protestors subjected to a disproportionate police response.
- During the state of emergency, at least 152,000 public service workers were dismissed or suspended with little or no right of appeal. Most were dismissed without knowing the evidence against them, for having an alleged “link or connection with terrorist organisations”. Additional sanctions such as a permanent ban on working in the public sector, loss of pension or eviction from publically owned homes, have also been imposed on many dismissed workers. Progressive trade unions including DISK and KESK have been particularly affected by the dismissals. A government appointed State of Emergency Appeals Commission has only considered a fraction of the appeals submitted, and has been highly criticised for its lack of independence, impartiality, transparency and inability to deal with the volume of cases.
- Since the imposition of the State of Emergency, Turkey has experienced a rapid erosion of democracy at a local and national level. By the end of 2017 the government had imprisoned 87 mayors and dismissed others for alleged terrorism related offences, replacing them with government appointed trustees. Many opposition MPs have also been imprisoned. A controversial referendum in 2017 narrowly approved major changes to the constitution, significantly increasing the powers of the president to appoint ministers, senior officials and judges and rule by decree, whilst diminishing the authority of parliament to hold the government to account. Both the referendum and the 2018 snap election, also held under the state of emergency, were heavily criticised for being weighted in favour of the ruling party through limits on freedoms of assembly and expression, unfair media coverage, misuse of state resources, intimidation and harassment by security forces, a lack of transparency and a failure to comply with legally prescribed processes.
- Freedom of expression has been severely limited under the State of Emergency, despite protections under international law. Turkey has become the biggest jailer of journalists in the world, with over 300 arrested and detained by the end of 2017. Over 100,000 websites were reported blocked in 2017 and many who criticise the government on social media have been arrested and investigated for alleged terrorism related offences.

Recommendations

The government of Turkey should:

- Repeal legislation and decrees implemented under the state of emergency, and take immediate steps to ensure that all legislation is compliant with its obligations under international human rights law.
- Reinstate dismissed public service workers and provide appropriate compensation for the loss of earnings and damage caused.
- Conduct a prompt, efficient and independent review of the cases of all those who were detained under the state of emergency and anti-terrorism legislation, and immediately release all prisoners who were detained without substantial evidence.
- Lift the closure of media outlets and release journalists, academics, trade unionists, human rights defenders and all others detained for exercising their right to freedom of expression.
- Restore democratic elections, including for local government, and take steps to ensure the independence of the legislative and judicial branches of government.
- Ensure that labour law complies with the ILO conventions.
- Conduct independent investigations into all killings, disappearances and allegations of torture and all other human rights abuses. Ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice and provide effective reparations for victims and family members who have been affected.
- End restrictions on freedom of movement including through the reinstatement of passports and citizenship.
- Reinstate the peace process in South East Turkey and release political prisoners so they can fully participate in process, alongside civil society, including trade unions.
- Takes steps to prevent the excessive use of force and open ended curfews by security forces.
- Ensure that people displaced by the violence in South East Turkey are fully involved in the restoration of decent homes and services.

The UK government should:

- Prioritise the above issues in their diplomatic relations with the government of Turkey.
- Ensure that any future trade agreement with Turkey includes robust protections for human and workers rights, democracy and the rule of law.
- Suspend the sale of arms to the government of Turkey.
- Support the resettlement of refugees from Turkey, and end the return of refugees and asylum seekers to Turkey on the flawed basis it is a safe third country.

Take action

UNISON is working in solidarity with progressive trade unions in Turkey to address the denial of human and workers rights by campaigning, providing direct support and calling on the UK government to respond to the situation.

- Write to the Foreign Secretary to call on the UK government to support human and workers' rights, democracy and the rule of law in Turkey.
- Write to and lobby your MP and other politicians to demand that the government take action on Turkey.
- Pass policy on Turkey in your branch.
- Support actions on Turkey from Solidarity with the People of Turkey, Labour Start, Amnesty International and other human rights organisations.
- Affiliate to Solidarity with the People of Turkey (SPOT).
- Support the ITUC/ETUC solidarity fund for Turkish trade unions.

UNISON
130 Euston Road
London NW1 2AY

🌐 unison.org.uk/international
✉ i.relations@unison.co.uk
📱 @UNISON_global