

(ESSENTIAL) WORKERS' DAY: THE STRUGGLE GOES ON, EVEN DURING A PANDEMIC

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The first day of may marks International Workers' Day, as a celebration of labor, those who produce labor, their ever-continuing struggle, and the strides made along the way with organized labor. Workers' Day is celebrated on May 1st to commemorate the Haymarket Affair, in which a peaceful rally of workers demanding an 8-hour workday in Chicago ended with a bombing and an armed conflict between the workers and the police on the 4th of May, 1886. After the clashes, a campaign of intimidation and persecution of workers and unionists in Chicago followed. 8 people were convicted of conspiracy in a sham trial. 7 of them were sentenced to death and ultimately 4 people were hanged and one committed suicide. No original bomber was ever charged. The Haymarket Affair drew both national and international attention, leading to more outcries to improve working conditions and hours and becoming one of the most influential events in the labor movement's history. Second International, an organization of socialist parties around the world declared there would be "a great international demonstration" on the May 1, 1890 following the plans of AFL, an American trade union. The first May 1 demonstrations were seen as a massive success, and influenced a wave of legislation that would reduce work hours for the working class. To this day, it's celebrated to appreciate the progress workers made and to voice their demands for better wages, working hours and conditions, safety and more.

The demands of workers since the initial celebration of the day have stayed the same: the right to unionize, a living wage, better work safety, tolerable working hours, healthcare and housing as a right, job security and so on. Although accomplishing a lot and securing many crucial rights the working class hasn't been successful in imposing the changes they were advocating for. One of the most pressing issues affecting the working class is wages. The federal minimum wage in the US is a hotly debated issue. Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont calls it "a starvation wage." The current federal minimum wage in the US is \$7.25 per hour, which is below what is needed for one working person to clear the poverty line for a household of two people calculated by the federal government at \$8.13 per hour. The minimum wage in Turkey is 2,324,7 Turkish liras per month, which is less than a third of the poverty line calculated by the trade union TÜRK-İŞ at 7,229 Turkish liras a month. The minimum wage in Turkey is both a huge economic issue for the country as a whole and a financial issue for working families individually as 43% of employees earn the minimum wage according to Eurostat. This figure is probably higher considering people who work informally and businesses that employ less than 10 people which

are excluded from this figure. Working people are crumbling under “starvation wages”, sharply increasing cost of living especially due to inflation and rising costs of food, housing, healthcare and education. Another significant cause of concern of the working class is workplace safety. Workplaces continue to be dangerous places for workers, as the Worker Health and Workplace Safety assembly of İstanbul reported that 1736 workers have died on their jobs in Turkey in 2019.

The constant rollback of working people’s rights and the endless decline in their standard of living is no coincidence. Every single aspect of working people’s lives is a deliberate result of the economic and political systems they exist in and the corporate greed that shapes these systems. Corporate greed intervenes in democracies, taking control of governments through election campaign contributions or cushy corporate jobs for politicians, stifles any change that would positively impact working people’s lives, cracks down on workers who unionize, and breaks safety nets for working people who aren’t fortunate enough to secure financial stability. The precarious life of working people is not a result of some big, unbelievable conspiracy. It’s simply a question of who we as a society prioritize: millions upon millions of working people or the wealthy few.

The COVID-19 outbreak’s impact is a scathing indictment of neoliberalism when looked at from a perspective of working people. Workers’ financial positions left them at a very dangerous place when they suddenly found out they were unemployed because of the pandemic. Unemployment skyrocketed in some countries, like the US which saw 30 million unemployment benefits applications since the start of the pandemic. Coupled with the high cost of living in most areas of the country this left many people very worried about getting a hold of even basic necessities such as food and housing. Turkey’s situation is no different. Soaring exchange rates accompanied by high prices left many people in a similar or maybe an even worse position than people in the US. The working people who are still employed but couldn’t shift to working from home are worried about being infected and spreading the disease to their families. Despite their continued calls for more social distancing measures and personal protective equipment, workers in healthcare, retail and transportation were more exposed to the virus as their demands weren’t met. Thousands of workers died of COVID-19 because necessary precautions weren’t taken.

Reality, again and again, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic showed us it’s neither healthy nor sustainable to continue working with a web of economic and political systems that sees workers as collateral damage. The way to right the system’s wrongs and remedy the problems the working class has is working people standing up for themselves and speak up, just like how the workers in Haymarket did in 1886.