

31 May 2021

Turkey: Eight labour rights defenders detained

On 25 May 2021 at dawn, police raided the homes of eight labour rights defenders who are both current and former executives of the **Health and Social Services Workers' Trade Union (SES)** following an order from Ankara's Chief Prosecutor. The eight labour rights defenders are currently being held at the anti-terror branch of the Police Headquarters in Ankara.

The [Health and Social Services Workers' Trade Union \(SES\)](#) is a professional non-governmental body working to secure fair salaries, job and workplace security and better conditions in the health sector. The SES represents its members during collective negotiations with employers and develops public health policies and promotes free, equal and qualified health services for all. Besides focusing on worker's rights, SES frequently speaks up against human rights violations and anti-democratic practices in Turkey.

The police detained co-Chair **Selma Atabey**, former member of central executive committee (CEC) **Belkız Yurtsever**, former Chair **Bedriye Yorgun** and former SES Ankara branch executive **Erdal Turan** at their homes in Ankara. Former SES Ankara branch executive **Ramazan Taş** was detained at a hospital in Ankara where he was accompanying his sick brother, who died the same morning. The police detained another former Chair **Gönül Erden** in Tunceli, former CEC member **Fikret Çalağan** in İstanbul and former executive member of SES Ankara branch **Rona Temelli** in Van and transferred them all to the Ankara police headquarters' custody.

The office of Ankara Chief Prosecutor announced that the arrests were conducted under the PKK/KCK investigation, and claimed that the eight labour rights defenders were acting as the "public health committee" of the outlawed organisation. A confidentiality order was placed on the investigation which makes it impossible for the eight labour rights defenders' lawyers, and others, to obtain any further information on the accusations or any evidence against the defenders.

SES has been making public statements and actions criticising the government's public health policies and the poor working conditions of healthcare workers during the pandemic. According to SES, 417 health workers died due to COVID-19. As of 31 May 2021, the total number of COVID-19 deaths in Turkey was [47,405](#).

During the launch of Turkey's Human Rights Action Plan in March 2021, President Erdoğan made a public commitment to end early morning police raids. However, this practice has continued and Front Line Defenders believes that the practice of house raids at dawn is used as a tool to intimidate and silence human rights defenders and critical voices.

Front Line Defenders is seriously concerned about the detention of the eight labour rights defenders as it believed that their detention is directly linked to their legitimate and peaceful work in defence of labour and human rights in Turkey. It is particularly concerned about any possible adverse effect that the detention may have on Rona Temelli's health during the pandemic, as he is a kidney transplant patient who uses medication and has to be under constant doctor supervision.

Front Line Defenders calls on the Turkish authorities to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Selma Atabey, Gönül Erden, Fikret Çalağan, Bedriye Yorgun, Belkis Yurtsever, Rona Temelli, Erdal Turan and Ramazan Taş, as it is believed that they are being held solely as a result of their legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of labour and human rights;

2. Ensure that the treatment of the eight labour rights defenders while in detention, adheres to the conditions set out in the 'Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment', adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 43/173 of 9 December 1988;
3. Revoke the confidentiality order on the investigation to ensure that the defenders, their lawyers, human rights organisations and the public are able to ensure that the investigation process is conducted in a fair and impartial manner;
4. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in Turkey and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.

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