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The class issues in the Turkish elections

By Halil Celik and Peter Schwarz

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The elections in Turkey on November 1 take place under conditions of unprecedented political and social turmoil. It is the second election this year, called after the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan lost its majority on June 7 and negotiations to form a coalition government failed.

Erdogan, who was pushing for constitutional changes to establish more authoritarian forms of rule, reacted to the AKP's defeat by intimidating and persecuting political opponents and journalists. At the centre of his attacks was the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), whose entry into parliament with 13 percent of the vote in June deprived the AKP of its majority.

In a desperate bid to maintain his grip on power, Erdogan has resumed the war against the Kurds, escalated the country's military intervention in Syria and resorted to dictatorial measures, bringing Turkey to the brink of civil war. It is widely suspected that the government had a hand in the recent terror attacks in Suruc and Ankara that claimed more than 150 lives.

Under the impact of the global economic crisis and the Syrian civil war, bourgeois rule in Turkey finds itself in deep crisis.

Since the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the entire Middle East has been ravaged by 14 years of uninterrupted war. Like the Balkans before World War I, it has been transformed into a cauldron of inter-imperialist rivalries, battles for regional hegemony, and ethnic and religious

conflicts that threaten to ignite a Third World War. Hundreds of thousands have been killed, millions made refugees.

US, British, French and German imperialism as well as Russia are directly involved, dropping tons of bombs on Syria and Iraq, fighting on the ground, and training and arming proxy forces. The danger of military encounters between the US and Russia spiraling out of control and escalating into a nuclear confrontation is growing.

Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel and Egypt are all vying for regional hegemony. Up to its neck in imperialist intrigues, each country is pursuing its own predatory agenda. The Turkish bourgeoisie is once again exposing its foul and rotten character. This is true not only for its Islamist wing under the leadership of the AKP, but also for its secular and nationalist wing, including the Kurdish nationalists.

Only a few years ago, Erdogan was hailed as a reformer and democrat by liberal sections of the bourgeoisie and the middle class. He was involved in a power struggle with the military, and, following the US-led wars in Iraq, Libya and Syria, pursued a policy of neo-Ottoman expansionism that led to a rapid growth of the Turkish economy, fuelled by a massive influx of foreign capital.

However, Erdogan and his supporters badly miscalculated. The overthrow of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood regime by the military and the various shifts in US policy toward Syria have brought Turkey into conflict with almost every neighbour, soured relations with the US, and provoked sharp conflicts between the AKP and other sections of the ruling elite, including its former ally, the pro-US Gülen movement.

In addition, the failure of the neo-Ottoman project, recession in Europe, the removal of funds by investors as part of a broader crisis of the “emerging markets,” and--after the Russian military intervention in Syria--the deterioration of relations with Russia, one of Turkey’s most important trading partners, have produced a deep economic crisis.

The Turkish lira has lost one third of its value within a year, the manufacturing index is falling, and revenues from tourism are declining. As a result, the AKP government is facing growing opposition from the working class and youth to rapidly rising unemployment, poverty and social inequality. Under these conditions, the Turkish bourgeoisie is again revealing its true face.

The opposition parties are in no position to pose as champions of democratic rights. The Kemalist Republican People’s Party (CHP) has been associated for decades with a military that has organized four coups since 1960 and violently oppressed the working class. After the June 7 election, it held negotiations with the AKP on a coalition government for weeks, and will undoubtedly do so again if Sunday’s election results in another draw.

The Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) has close ties to fascistic forces. It is deeply hostile to the working class and democratic rights, particularly the rights of the Kurds.

The People's Democratic Party (HDP), a main target of the AKP's attacks, does not represent the Kurdish masses and certainly not the Kurdish workers, who live in large numbers in big cities such as Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir. Rather, it is a political instrument of the Kurdish bourgeoisie, which is looking to strike its own deal with imperialism and share in the exploitation of the working class.

Even after brutal military operations in Kurdish regions of Turkey, hundreds of raids against its offices by Turkish fascists overseen by the police, and suicide bombing attacks on its supporters, the HDP still declares its readiness to participate in, or support a coalition with, the AKP.

The HDP's orientation is not to the working class. Like the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) and the different Kurdish nationalist factions in Iraq and Syria, it is courting the favour of one or another of the imperialist powers and offering them its services.

In the final analysis, the drive to dictatorship and militarism is not the result of Erdogan's personal ambitions or the AKP's corruption. It has deep roots in the origins of the Turkish state and the character of the Turkish bourgeoisie.

When the Republic of Turkey was founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923, the period in which the bourgeoisie could carry out a genuine democratic revolution had long since ended on an international scale. As Leon Trotsky, who together with Lenin led the 1917 Russian Revolution, explained in his theory of permanent revolution, in countries with a belated bourgeois development "the complete and genuine solution of their tasks of achieving democracy and national emancipation is conceivable only through the dictatorship of the proletariat as the leader of the subjugated nation, above all, of its peasant masses."

While the three-year war against the imperialist carve-up of Turkey led by Kemal had a progressive element, the Kemalists proved unable to achieve genuine democracy and independence from imperialism. This was most clearly expressed in the ferocious hostility of the Turkish state to any independent movement of the working class and its inability to provide democratic rights to the Kurds, Armenians, Greeks or other national minorities.

Despite the official promotion of Turkish nationalism by the state, Turkey has always remained a client of US imperialism, to which it is closely tied by its NATO membership.

The renewed carve-up of the Middle East by the imperialist powers brings all of these historical questions to the fore. None of them has been resolved. What has changed is the size of the working class, which has massively increased. Measured by its social composition, Turkey is no longer a backward country. Millions have left the countryside for the cities and joined the ranks of the international proletariat.

Not a single one of the parties standing in the election has anything to offer to these millions of workers and youth. It is difficult to predict the exact result of the election, but it will not resolve a single problem that is driving the country into war, civil war and dictatorship. In the event that the AKP does not achieve its aim of obtaining a majority in parliament, it will react either with

provocations and further moves towards dictatorship or with a sordid deal with another party at the expense of the working masses.

Turkish workers and youth cannot tie their fate to any of the bourgeois factions competing for parliamentary seats. Those who call on them to support the HDP, as many pseudo-left organisations do, are perpetrating a criminal deception. The HDP is deeply hostile to an independent movement of the working class. Like Syriza in Greece, it appeals to social and democratic grievances to further its own social interests. It will inevitably betray every election promise to gain an advantage for the Kurdish bourgeois elements it represents.

The only social force that can overcome the dangers of war, civil war and dictatorship is the international working class. As the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) wrote in its July 2014 statement “Socialism and the Fight Against Imperialist War:”

The same contradictions driving imperialism to the brink provide the objective impulse for social revolution. The globalisation of production has led to a massive growth of the working class. Only this social force, which owes no allegiance to any nation, is capable of putting an end to the profit system, which is the root cause of war.

Turkish workers must build their own independent party, a Turkish section of the ICFI. They must fight for a workers’ government on the basis of a socialist program, committed to the nationalization of the banks and big companies and the reorganization of the economy so as to meet social needs.

The imperialist carve-up of the Middle East cannot be stopped by drawing new borders and establishing a new state for each ethnicity and religion, but only by uniting the workers and oppressed of the region under the banner of a Socialist Federal Republic of the Middle East.